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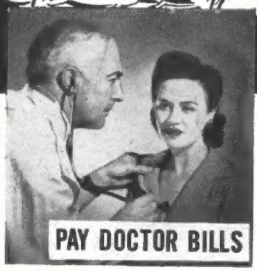

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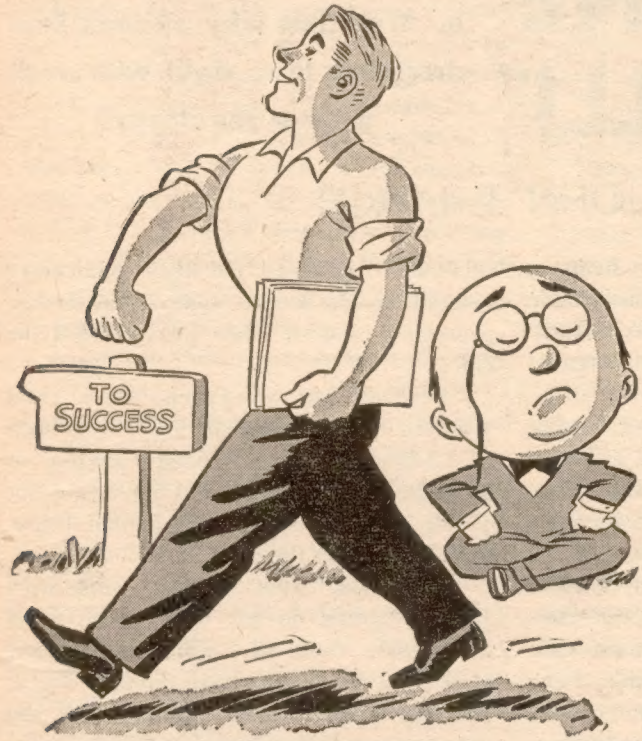
How to pass a genius



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"I HATE YOU ONE AND ALL!"

The Screechin' Hollow hermit claimed the world would be a lot better with fewer people in it. Was that why citizens kept dropping from sight with such sinister regularity?

By JOHN T. LYNCH

IN HIS own quiet, solitary manner, Jemuel Gnaggs acquired a comfortable fortune in the gold rush at Pike's Peak in '59. He also acquired a deep hatred of the human race.

In search of a sparsely populated, remote spot in which to settle down alone, and have as little truck as possible with his fellow men, Gnaggs made his way up through the narrow granite passes in the heart of the Taos Range, in New Mexico, until he came to the tiny settlement called Screechin' Hollow. He nodded, happily, as he gazed upon the few ramshackle saloons, shacks and one general store that made up the mining town. He also smiled when he noted that the place had only one other narrow trail, also through narrow canyons, leading away from it. One way in—one way out. And you'd meet very few travelers, one way or another.

Jemuel grimaced in disgust as he alighted from his gaunt cayuse in front of the general store. If it wasn't for the fact that a man had to buy tobacco, whiskey, and food from other men, a person could live forever without even speaking to one of the two-legged sons. You wouldn't even have to live near a town. . . . Jemuel shrugged and went into the store.

Pest Bradson, owner of the store, gasped and automatically reached for his ever-handy Winchester on seeing the huge, shaggy, yet somehow cadaverous-looking stranger.

Jemuel Gnaggs, accustomed as he was to this usual frightened and uncomplimentary reaction to his natural appearance, merely grunted in disgust when Pest grabbed the rifle.

"Put that rusty blunderbuss down," said Jemuel. "I ain't goin' to hurt you, much as I'd like to." Then Gnaggs, anxious to be in the company of his old horse, and out of the presence of another human being, came straight to the point.

"Like most other people," announced Jemuel, "you'd do any damn thing for a leetle gold. Well, all I want you to do is kind of be my agent. Each month I'll give you fifty dollars for your trouble. All you got to do is tell me where I can find a shack —away from others—and deliver me grub a couple of times a week. Also, once a month, a money draft will come to me from a bank in Denver. That's where I got my gold deposited—and I got an arrangement that they send me a regular amount—just enough to get by on—from now on until I die. When the money draft comes, you cash it, take out the fifty I am payin' you, and also for the grub I buy. That's all they is to it. And, mainly, I don't want no palaver with you, nor with anybody else. I just wanta' be all by myself. I'll leave you notes, if I ain't at my shack when you deliver the stuff, if I want anything extry. If I ain't there, don't look me up. And if I am, don't even speak to me. They ain't no more to say. Agreed?"

Storekeeper Bradson agreed with alacrity.

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

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WITHIN a few hours, Jemuel Gnaggs was ensconced in a remotely-situated cabin, about five miles up the single trail that led to the next town, Sandy Bar, sixty miles distant. So deserted was this section that only two other cabins were on the same trail between Jemuel's new place and the town of Screechin' Hollow. Swett Kelly, erstwhile saloon-keeper, lived in the first one, and, as Jemuel was glad to learn, Pest Bradson, himself, owned the next one, three miles from Gnaggs' place. Jemuel's cabin was the last one out from town.

For three months, Jemuel Gnaggs lived as he wished. He had finally succeeded in arranging things so he would have as little contact as possible with mankind in general. Pest Bradson was keeping up his end of the bargain with dependable regularity. Each Wednesday he would deliver enough grub, tobacco and whiskey to keep Jemuel well supplied until the following week.

Slowly, but surely, then, a dark pall of fear and horror descended upon the little town of Screechin' Hollow. Men began to disappear, one by one.

First, Doc Black went out on an emergency call, one dark night. He never came back. His good wife had no idea just whom it was who had called the willing physician to his doom. Next, Will Tate, an honest gambler whose tastes leaned to large diamond rings and stickpins, told friends he was going out on a short hunting trip. Nobody saw him again.

Fully fourteen men—including several of Screechin' Hollow's best and most respected business men—simply disappeared within the short period of two months. The fear-ridden folks of the town organized searching parties, informal guard details, and started a policing system. Still, every now and then, a lone man would seem to be swallowed up by horrible, unseen forces. . . .

From the first, to be sure, the human-being hater, Jemuel Gnaggs, was under suspicion. Supposedly unknown to Gnaggs, a round the clock watch was set upon him. Two men, from the safe distance of high, hidden crags and rims, spied upon him as he hunted, fished and listlessly did a bit of prospecting. It was duly noted when he went into, and left, his cabin. But not one thing could be brought forth as evidence that the strange hermit, Gnaggs, was the cause of the untimely disappearances. Yet, men continued to vanish. Old friends began to distrust each other. The nerves of the town were getting raw.

In Pest Bradson's general store, one cloudy morning, a hushed group was seated around the cracker barrel. As though afraid to hear their own voices, they whispered about the latest vanishing man—Lem Maybry, the mayor.

The folks of Screechin' Hollow were not a cowardly lot. Many times, collectively and as individuals, they had proved capable of taking good care of themselves, with fists, knives or guns. But, then, they had something definite to fight. Something that could be seen and understood. Something alive and concrete. Now, it seemed, they were up against an intangible, evil thing. Something you couldn't see; something you couldn't fight.

Deeply wrapped in their own fearsome thoughts, the group around the cracker barrel were startled suddenly. Jemuel Gnaggs had made his way into the store, and stood before them. He singled out Pest Bradson. Pointing a long, bony finger at him, Jemuel said, "You're gettin' paid to help me keep private by myself. How come you stand for me being trailed, and spied on? I been puttin' up with it for a long time—but it's got to stop. Anyways, what's the idea?"

A few of those present had drawn their sixguns. Jemuel Gnaggs was, under any circumstances, a menacing sight. Sight of the weapons in the hands of his friends gave

(Continued on page 10)

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(Continued from page 8)

Pest nerve enough to blurt out the explanation. "Men have been gettin' swallowed up in thin air. Vanishin'. They leave to visit another town, maybe, or just mosey up the trail toward Sandy Bar—the trail that passes your shack. They don't come back."

"What's that to me?" asked Gnaggs. "This world could do without a hell of a lot of men. None of 'em, includin' me, is any good." He leaned down and patted a mangy, one-eyed yellow dog that had followed him into the store. "This here dog, what I found, alone, out on the trail, though, he's different. I'd hate to see him disappear. But men, bah!"

"That's just why we put watchers on you, Gnaggs. I told everybody how you hate humans. You probably enjoy killin' 'em. We think you're responsible—"

Carl Luttig, the town blacksmith and part-time judge of the miner's court butted in. "Now, wait a minute, Pest," he said. "You're talkin' too much. You ain't tellin' the truth, exactly." Carl turned to Gnaggs and gave him a fleeting smile. "I admit, Gnaggs, you are under suspicion. But—so is every body else, now. It just happens, though, that these missing men didn't turn up missin' until you'd been in these diggin's for a time. An', you wantin' to be a hermit. Also, the things you told Pest Bradson about how you didn't cater for human company. You see—"

Jemuel Gnaggs cut in. "So, these wise hombres thought they was detectives, huh? Spyin' on me. Hell, I wouldn't kill nobody. Human' bein's ain't worth even killin'. But—I want to be left alone. An' as long as this disappearin' is goin' on, I'll be trailed and gaped at by some of you monkeys. So, I warn you all. I aim to do some detectin', myself. I aim to clear this up—for only one reason. I want peace and privacy." The yellow dog followed Jemuel Gnaggs from the store.

"I still think he's the one," muttered Pest Bradson. "Why, we all know each other too well to be thinkin' anything else."

Everybody nodded in agreement, except the level-headed Carl Luttig. He would wait and see. A blacksmith learns patience from the horses he shoes.

IT WAS a full week before Jemuel Gnaggs appeared in town again. Followed by the one-eyed hound, he made his way directly to Carl Luttig's blacksmith shop. "Get these loafer out'n here, Lustig," commanded Gnaggs. "I want to talk to you—private."

When the two men were alone in the little shop, Jemuel Gnaggs brought forth a greasy old flour sack. Dumping the contents on a work table, he grunted, "I hope you ain't got a squeamish belly."

Carl Luttig gazed, speechless and horrified, at the assorted feet, legs, arms—and one bearded head—of former human beings.

"What—where. . . ." gasped the blacksmith.

"I said I was goin' to do some detectin'. I did it. Except the dog, here, is the real detective. He dug up th' first laig. That one with th' torn boot on it. Yep, he—"

"Where—tell me where this mess came from. And how—"

"Easy, man, easy," soothed Gnaggs. "You see—I did some figgerin'. As I heard it, all the men what disappeared were headed out the trail toward Sandy Bar. Only three shacks out on that trail. First, nearest town, is that saloon man's place, Swett Kelly, I think they call him. Next comes Pest Bradson's shack—though he ain't around it much. Then, farthest from town, is mine. Now—I knew the men what vanished must've done it before they ever got near my shack. That meant, maybe, that they got waylaid at either of the other ones. First, I went down to Kelly's place. Me an' the dog, that is. I made sure he wasn't home. Then we snooped around some. Well, sir—we didn't find nothin'."

(Continued on page 114)

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By DEE LINFORD

BUNCH

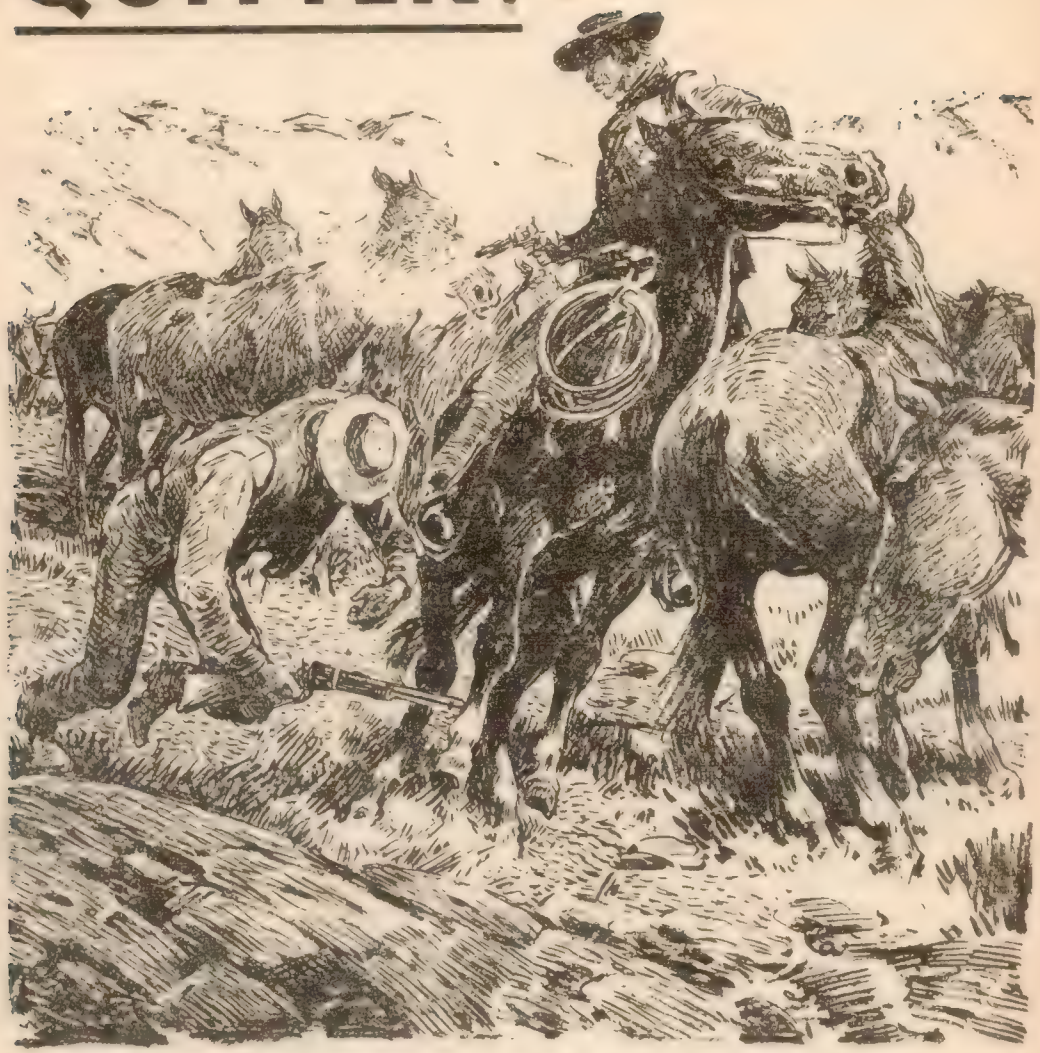
It was a cattle drive they'd never forget—those who lived to see the end. A thousand miles through hell's backyard, with one eye always on the dying foreman—and the other watching for the kill-crazy kid who'd shot him!

CHAPTER ONE

The Bronc

WHEN I say that one bunch-quitting bronc can give more trouble around an outfit than all your sleepers and buckers and bad actors combined, I'm not merely speaking of horses. What I mean is that if you know your business, you can usually find ways to wake up the sleepers and coax the buck out of the bad ones. But,

QUITTER!



Whitey Rood had a pistol in his hand, and the barrel was trailing smoke. . . .

horse or man, you can't stomp a bunch-quitter into staying put, and I never found one you could bait into staying around once it has made up its mind to go. So any time you see you've got one, you will be ahead to get shed of it right off, because it's bound to quit you anyhow, and if you give it half a chance, it will do you dirt.

Just like that hammerhead, Cotton Rood, that I got mixed up with out in the Blue-grass country in Wyoming, in Eighty-three.

I first got to know him on a cow drive out of Oregon, back when Old Man Jardine was buying up Durham she-stuff there and trailing it east to Wyoming, to breed up his Longhorn stock. You can't tell the breachy ones just by looking at them, and we were short a hand, and when Rood offered to quit the man he worked for without any notice, we none of us thought much about it.

We were shoving off next morning, and the place the kid worked at was twenty miles away.

"Ol' Stacey, he don't need me, nohow," he said to Jardine. "My job was over, when I delivered them caddle he sold you. When I git an address, I'll write him for my check."

We didn't even know then that it was Stacey's mare and rig he rode.

We'd camped that night outside of Baker City, the shoving-off point for places east, and when the kid threw in with us, we all thought we'd got a hand. He wasn't much older than twenty, and toted square, to look at. He was tall and tow-headed and had an easy grin. But there was a bronco streak in him, and it showed a little that very first night, when Long Slim Jackson jumped him about his horse.

Long Slim was Jardine's foreman, and usually had the say on the hiring and firing of the men. He was an old Texas rawhider, and knew cows and horses from the middle both ways. He knew more about men than was comfortable, too, when you were trying to slip something past him.

"Better swap that switcher off and git yourself a horse," Slim told the kid that first night at supper. "We got a thousand miles to trail, and trouble enough without a mare along to keep the geldings all stirred up."

"Go on!" the kid laughed, showing there were some things he didn't know. "Geldings ain't got nothing left to git stirred up with."

"They got as much as they ever had—in their heads," Slim told him. "And one mare in a bunch is worse than fifty. I ain't having one, in mine."

"Then you better find another man," the kid said. "Where I go, that mare goes."

He had us where the hair was short, and was smart enough to see it. Every cowman in Wyoming and Montana then was cutting down his Longhorn stock and replacing it with Oregon reds. There had been twenty or thirty drives leave Baker already that year, and there just wasn't no riders left to hire. We'd come out short-handed, like the others, figuring to hire men there and save travel costs one way. Jardine had picked up two boys over in the John Day country. But that only gave us eight, counting Jackson and the cook. Seven riders for twenty-five hundred cows and calves wasn't none too many.

"Well, I guess that's up to you, not to me," Slim told him. And the rest of us all groaned, thinking what it meant. But right then Old Man Jardine put his oar in.

"Slim," he said, "you won't have another chance to hire a man until you hit Fort Hall, and that's three hundred desert miles away. I can't have you shoving off shorter handed than you already are."

"You mean you're hiring him, against my say-so?" Slim said.

"I got no choice," the Old Man said. "I got too much tied up in them Shorthorns to take any chances."

The way I looked at it, the Old Man was taking a sight bigger chance, saddling Slim with a man he didn't want, and a broncy one at that. The Old Man wasn't going back with us, but was taking the stage and train, the way we'd come. Him hiring the kid over Slim's objections kind of gave the kid the upper hand. And Slim was plenty finicky about who had top hold on the stick.

But I figured, wrongly, that it wouldn't be no hide off me. . . .

WE GOT the herd across the Snake River without no fuss or feathers lost. Our trail was up the Snake, all the way across Idaho, and into Wyoming by way of Star Valley and Green River and South Pass, down the Sweetwater to the Platte. We had a good cook on the chuck wagon, and the nighthawk drove the bed wagon, as was the usual arrangement. Every rider had four horses to change off with, and with one of the John Day men driving the horses, it left six of us to worry the cows and calves

along. And worry is just about the right word.

That Oregon stock was mostly reds and roans that had descended from the immigrant work and milk animals the pioneers had brought out from the Middle West, bred up by imported Shorthorn bulls. They were built mostly on the Shorthorn side, but higher-headed and longer-horned than your true blue-blood Durhams. They were mighty fine cattle. But wet cows and young calves of any breed are not no picnic to trail.

"We'll just have to take it slow enough for these her yaller-tails to keep up, if it takes us all summer," Long Slim told us. "The Old Man, he's worried about his investment. And all these little dividends will be big ones, someday."

Which was true, of all that lived. But my big worry that drive wasn't about the Old Man's investment return. Before I seen the Bluegrass again, I was wondering about my own return. And it all went back to this Cotton Rood and his broncy, high-tailed ways.

That first morning, he reared up and pawed the air because Slim put him back on the drag, with me and Moss Tappan, to eat dust and work in the heat of the whole twenty-five hundred.

"I didn't hire out as no drag rider," he told Slim. "I work best on the flank."

"You give me any lip, I'll show you how I work on the haunches," Slim said to him. "Oregon's back in that dye-rection, if you hanker to stay."

Slim rode off then, and I do believe the punk would have took himself off right then, if I had kept out of it. But I had to go and open my big black mouth, as they say.

"What the hell, Whitey?" I said. "One end of a cow's as good as the other. Why, I'd worked at Shoe-sole for seven years before I found out a cow *had* two ends. What you got to yell about?"

All of us that worked at Moccasin called it the Shoe-sole; that's what the iron looked like, burned on the side of a cow.

I maybe stretched the truth some, saying I'd been with the outfit for seven years. But I was interested in splitting the work six ways instead of five, and couldn't leave good enough alone.

"Well," the hammerhead said, "I'd sooner look at a cow's rump than that old screw-face, anyhow. He rides the point, I'll ride the drag."

"Every man to his taste," I said, already sorry if I'd influenced him.

For a while, we had it good. New grass was coming, and weather was fine. Until we hit them Idaho lava beds, we had plenty water. Rained a little every day, just enough to settle the dust and wet the grass, and make a man untie his slicker. We didn't break no speed records, but the Old Man had told us to baby the calves along, so we didn't have to bust ourselves. Then, just as we were getting spoiled, we struck the lava, and it was just like falling into hell.

That country's called Craters of the Moon today, and I've been told that people travel hundreds of miles to see it. To me, it's always been like a nightmare, and not only on account of what happened there, either. It's dead country, with all that infernal rock set in twists and folds like it had been stirred up with a spoon. It was full of big craters and crazy caves that blew hot air at you.

The sun turned hotter than Hades and dried up all the surface water, and what grass there was you couldn't wipe your feet with. The rock cut the animals' feet like steel.

We had iron along to shoe the horses with, but the cows and calves just had to wear their feet off. Along in the afternoon of the first day in it, the little fellers began to lay down and not get up. We heaved the bedrolls on the chuck wagon and turned the bed wagon into a nursery rig. But we couldn't commence to haul them all, and

with the whole herd in danger, we just had to take to shooting them and whooping the others on.

Shooting the calves raised hell with the cows, and we'd have to rope them and neck them to cows that were more willing. Then their bags swelled up, and we had to throw them and milk them out.

It wasn't no picnic, especially back on the drag where the dust got so thick that if your horse stumbled it couldn't even fall down. That rock dust cut the eyes and throat like powdered glass, and there wasn't no way you could keep out of it.

"I didn't hire out for no siege like this," Rood bellyached to me. "There must be easier ways of making forty dollars and found."

"You could take up sheep-herding," I said to him. "If you got any sheep."

"The hell with that," he said. "I work with cows."

"Well, make up your mind," I told him.

BY THAT time, we'd all been drove poor and proddy, like the cows. We all were jumping down each other's throats, over nothing at all. And Slim and Rood were getting into it over the kid's mare, just the way I'd looked for them to do.

It was a funny thing about that paint. Outside of being a mare and a pinto too, she was a fine animal to look at and to ride. Sound in wind and limb and a fine running walker, about everything you'd want in something to ride, even if white men them days did look down on broken colors and call them Injun ponies. But, damn her hide, she didn't want to leave that Oregon country. Nor she never missed chance to sneak off, at night, to head back. And every time she went, she took a following of admiring young gelds along.

"Whitey," Slim said to him one night, "that thing you call a horse is a bunch-quitter, besides all else she is. If you don't git shed of her, I'll git shed of her for you."

This Rood was cocky as an airedale pup, and wore a pistol all the time, even out there in the lava where there wasn't even no snakes to shoot at. He wouldn't back down for Slim.

"Jackson," he said, knowing that it rubbed Slim wrong to be called anything but Slim, "I had an understanding about that mare, with Old Man Jardine. He hired me, and you ain't about to run me off. And I might as well tell you now: Anything you do to that mare, I'm a-going to do to you."

You just didn't talk to Slim Jackson that way. Not and get away with it. I looked for Slim to cloud up and rain all over him. But we were still strapped for help, and with Slim the herd came first. I knew it wasn't easy, but he held in and gave the bronc another chance.

"Well," he said, "you better sleep with her, then. Because the next time we spend any time looking for horses the old devil has coaxed away, you'll git a chance to make horse meat out of me."

We kind of figured after that the hammerhead must be more bark than bite, because he turned to and tried to keep the squaw-skate around. Kept her up as a night horse when he had the shift, and hobbled and belled her when he turned her out.

But she could travel faster hobbled than most horses four-legged. And she was smart. Her trick was to hide out in a draw or timber, when there was some, in the night. Come daylight, she would stand quiet, so the bell wouldn't give her away.

Every morning, while the rest of us got a bait, Rood would ride around and spot her by the gelds that seemed to like just to stand close to her, and work her back into the bunch before he ate. But the night we hit the Big Wood River, the nighthawk doped off, and she got away. Rood was after her quick as it was light. But it was eight or nine o'clock before he showed up with the mare and her friends.

Slim didn't say a word. Just walked to his horse, took down his saddle gun and plugged her in the head. I only heard one shot, so they both must have come together.

I was watching that mare kick out her last when I heard Moss Trappan swear. I looked around, and saw Long Slim hunched over, folding at the knees.

For a minute, even then, I couldn't get it through my head what had happened. Then I looked over at Whitey Rood. He had pulled up about twenty feet off, and was setting there on his foamy horse. He had a pistol in his hand, and the barrel was trailing smoke.

By the time I'd got over to Slim, Moss and Jim Click had beat me there, and had turned him over, face-up. His right shoulder looked smashed, and there was a sucking and bubbling when he breathed. He wouldn't look at us, or try to say a word. But he did go on breathing. So it wasn't murder—yet.

We just stood around for a while, looking at Slim and each other, with nobody offering to take it on himself to do anything or even say anything. The herd had cleaned up what grass there was, and I could see we should be moving.

"We can't just stand here," I said, when nobody else spoke up. "Arrange a bed on the wagon, and we'll wrestle him up."

The cook had water heated, and I rustled up some dish towels for bandages. Moss heated a piece of iron, to cauterize with. But I figured a wound as deep as Slim's should be kept open. We disinfected it with horse liniment, and tied it up. Then we lifted him on the wagon and got him settled.

"Drive as easy as you can," I told the cook. "Camp on the first good water you hit, where there's grass. Moss, you better scout ahead of him and see if you can find a decent place. Git us out of this damned lava, if you can. Rest of us will bring the cows."

They struck out, and when I'd got back on my horse, I remembered Rood. He was still setting on his horse, holding his pistol ready, trying to watch me and everybody else at once.

"Damn him!" he said, the minute I looked at him. "I warned the son. I told him anything he done to that mare I'd do to him."

"You haven't got to say nothing," I told him. "They way I look at it, the less you say the better."

Then I took the others and rode out to get the herd started.

CHAPTER TWO

Fence-Jumper

MOSS and the cook found water about ten miles farther on, and we went into camp again, about an hour before sundown. There was a little belt of grass up and down the creek on both the banks. The cows and loose horses settler right down to graze, and the rest of us collected around the wagon. And there for a while, we had a pretty sorry time.

Long Slim was still breathing, but that was about all. He couldn't talk, and didn't seem to know us. There wasn't nobody to give orders, and everybody just stood around Slim the way the horses had stood around Rood's painted mare, back where Slim had dropped her, snorting and sniffing at the blood. The cook didn't make no motions toward getting supper, and nobody was with the herd, and pretty quick it was going to be getting dark on us.

It seemed to me the whole outfit was going to pieces, and there we were, out in the middle of that big gut of creation, a hundred miles from nowhere, with twenty-five hundred cows and calves that wouldn't never get gathered up, if we let them scatter. I felt lost and scared, and halfway mean.

"Git your fire lit, Pete, and for hell's

sake pile some grub," I told the cook. "You others, don't stand there like you was being milked. Switch your tails around and rustle up some wood and water. Moss, you run the horses in, so we can git our night ponies lined up and let these others out to graze. Let's git to doing things."

Well, they all acted kind of relieved that somebody spoke up and told them what to do. All, that is, but Rood. He had strung along with us from the other camp, but he hadn't said a word since I had shut him up, back at the other place, nor he didn't get close to anybody. All day, he'd just rode along with his pistol in his hand, watching the rest of us like we were a bunch of wolves that would all jump him at once, the minute he put that gun away.

I paid him no attention, there in camp. Instead, I did what I could for Slim, which wasn't much. Then I got pencil and paper and made out a new watch list that didn't include the hammerhead. I got the other two Oregon men fed and out with the herd, and by then the cook had a bait for the rest of us.

Rood still set up on his horse, watching us and keeping mum, that pistol in his hand.

"Better git down, Whitey, and feed your face," I said. "You might not git another chance."

HE THOUGHT it over, then piled off and tied the horse to the calf wagon. He walked over to the fire like he was approaching a den of snakes, filled his plate and cup, then backed over to his horse again and went to eating on his feet. It rasped me, seeing him try to juggle his tools in that kind of position, all without never letting go of that gun or taking his eyes off us.

"Put down that hoglaig, before you go and shoôt somebody else," I told him. "I don't expect you're going to need it. I don't expect it would do you any good, if you should."

But he didn't pay me no attention. I got my own plate then, and all the while I ate, I tried to think what was the best thing to do.

I'd put off thinking about things all day, expjecting maybe someone else would take the lead, or at least make some suggestions. But it was plain by now that the Oregon men didn't feel involved, and Moss and Jim and the rest seemed as buffaloed as I was.

"Where in hell are we?" I said to Moss, who'd been over the trail before and should know.

"This here crick is Lost River," he said. "Plays hiding seek all through this country —runs on top a ways, then disappears. Now you see it, now you don't."

"I see it now," I said. "What I want to know is where we're at."

"Well," he said, "I'd say, off-hand, that we're about midway between Fort Hall and Boise City. It's a good week's ride, either way."

"Fnish your supper," I told him. "Then take four horses and two saddles, and strike out for Hall. See if you can't fetch a sawbones back. I'm afraid Slim's done for."

"I could make better time back to Boise," he mentioned.

"But you wouldn't git back as quick," I said. "We're a-going to keep moving. There ain't grass here to support a camp. And if the wagon takes it careful, Slim will do as well as staying still. Besides, we'll be gitting nearer help."

Nobody stood up and asked me how come I was taking things onto myself. Nobody said aye, yes, kiss my foot, or nothing. I saw that was just how things were going to be.

I wrote out a wire to the Old Man, telling him what had happened, what we were doing, and asking for instructions, and handed it to Moss, to send from Hall. Then we wrangled him some horses, and got him on his way.

Then I was down to the hard part.

I mean, I didn't know what was the right thing to do about Rood. I could take him

on to Hall, and turn him over to authorities there. But people didn't care much then about strangers that got shot, and I knew they'd only turn him loose. Maybe if we all stayed around, we could get him prosecuted. But we couldn't stay around. We had a herd to trail.

I figured if I said the word, the boys would guy the wagon tongue up, thread a rope through the pole cap's eye, and settle Whitey's hash then and there. But Slim wasn't dead yet. Even if he had been, I wasn't up to dishing out no vigilante justice. I could take the lead where the men and cows came in. But my contract didn't cover hanging.

Besides, with Slim and Moss both off, I needed the punk with the herd.

Whitey had licked his plate, and was waiting. The others were done, too, and watching me. I'd started taking things upon myself, and I could see now I'd have to take it all.

"Whitey," I said, "you're raised hell, and put a prop under it. But it ain't up to me to judge you. As far as I'm concerned, you're free either to go, tonight, or to stick and face the music on the other end. Which you want to do?"

"You think I'd be fool enough to stick, and face trial in Slim's home county?" he said. "You think I'd git anything like a fair try?"

"I ain't paid to think," I told him. "If you're such a hand for it, you should of done some before you blasted Slim. I'm giving you a choice."

"Can I ride this horse—or another one?" he wanted to know.

I shook my head. "That's a company animal. So are all the others, now. The company don't owe you no horse."

"You expect me to walk out of this hell—afoot?" he asked.

"I don't expect nothing," I said, liking him less the more he said. "Nor I don't care what you do. I only want you to make up your mind."

"He better light a shuck," Jim Click said; the first sentiments he'd expressed. "I don't fancy his company, all the way to the Bluegrass."

"If the Old Man had left it up to Slim, we wouldn't of had him along to start with," George Hart said, like it mattered. "Or if Slim had run him off."

"If the dog hadn't stopped, he'd of caught the rabbit," I said. "I was only thinking of how short-handed we are. But we can put it to a vote."

"Hell, no," Jim said hastily. "You're running the wagon now. If you say he goes, he goes."

"That's right," Hart said. "I wasn't meaning to tell you how to do."

"I wish to hell you would," I said, and meant it. But they wouldn't add to what they'd said. I turned back to Rood again.

"You can stay, or you can take off. But, if you stick, I'll take custody of that smoke pole. And I want your word you'll go the whole way with us. I won't have you letting us haul you out the lava, then leaving us in the lurch. Which way you want it to be?"

He glared at me like the whole thing had ben my fault. "You don't give me much choice," he said. "I'll stick."

And I was innocent enough to believe him.

THE next seven days were rough ones. But we managed to manage, as Jim Click put it. And, on the eighth, Moss showed up with the doctor. Told a story about having to kidnap him to get him to come at all. And the way it looked, Moss had only wasted his time and sweat.

The pill roller did clean Slim up, and change his bandage, and dope him some. But I noticed he liked his own medicine too good to give much of it away. He didn't give us no hope at all for Slim.

"Just as well bury him, today," he said to me. "That man's tack is drove."

"Shut up," I said to him. "You want

Slim should hear what you're sayin'?"

"He don't hear nothing," the doc said, "unless it's harps. He's dead already. He just won't stop breathing."

I turned around and saw this Whitey standing close to us, rubbering to what was said. I didn't think much about it, right then. But I thought of it in the morning, when Moss came to shake me awake.

"Ash," he said, "our bunch quitter pulled out again last night. Took them two mavericks along, too."

I sat up and looked at him. "Say what you mean, for the Good Lord's sake!"

"I mean that Whitey Rood," Moss said. "Took off last night. Cut twenty the best horses out the herd, and lit a shuck for somewheres. Some time after midnight."

"What about them other two Oregon men," I said, jumping up. "They went on night herd, at midnight. Didn't they see what he was up to?"

"That's what I mean about the mavericks," Moss said. "He took that pair of deuces with him."

Well, that kind of knocked my wind out. I hadn't had no big regard for them two. But they'd pulled their weight around the herd, and seemed honest. They'd been chummy with the hammerhead, at least before the shooting, but I'd thought that was pretty natural, them all being from the same country.

I got my night horse, and rode out with Moss. Jim Click and Ed Heavers were already there, with the horse herd. We'd had fifty head to start with, counting the two four-up teams for each wagons. Now we had thirty head, and one four-up team for each of the wagons. All the way through, they'd culled the bunch and took the best.

Jim and Ed already had found the trail. It led off to the east and could have been headed for either Hall or Eagle Rock, a good ways up the river. The tracks had caught the dew, and I figured they had a good five hours start on us.

"Well," Moss said, fingering the rifle he had fetched from camp, "who goes after 'em—besides me?"

"Nobody goes after 'em," I said.

"What?" they all three yelled at once.

"Add it up," I told them. "There's five of us now, counting the cook. There's three of them, and no point in any less than three of us giving chase. That leaves one man and one cook ot keep this herd together. If we're going to use up any men and horses, we better use 'em gitting this herd to Hall."

I could see by their faces they didn't like it. And I wasn't in no real position to be giving orders. So I talked some more.

"Figure it out," I said. "The Old Man's got twenty-five thousand dollars tied up in them beevies. The horses them Oregon hustlers got away with are worth a thousand dollars at the outside, Wyoming prices. So which we going to worry about?"

"You mean, just write the horses off?" Moss said.

"Write 'em off—to experience," I said, wishing I could get within gun-range of that hammerhead, with a Winchester in my hands. "We've learned what to do about bunch quitters, anyhow."

"That's just what he figured you'd do," Moss accused me. "That's why he didn't take all the switchers, but them tied in at the wagon. He figured if he left you enough to move the caddle with, you'd stick with the caddle and not chase him."

"What he thinks don't change my job any," I said. "Or yours either. And we got enough to do without sitting here, stirring up the wind."

There was grass there, for another night. So we laid over, not to waste it and to let the cattle rest. We could only take one wagon from there, so we sorted out the stuff, and rolled the bed wagon into the water so the wheels wouldn't fall apart. We assassinated what calves we could see wouldn't never make Hall on their own steam. And in the morning, as quick as it

grew light, we started moving "caddle."

The worst of the country was behind us, so we had the benefit of better grass and water. But it was still plain hell, four of us trying to push a herd that size and keep it moving. I took the drag myself, and put Moss up on the point, him knowing the trail. The other two rode flank. The loose horses we just had to rope together, head to tail, and tie behind the wagon, where they gave the cook an awful lot of trouble.

But us others had trouble, too. We each went through four-five horses a day, and sometimes I used as many as seven, back in the dust, worrying them sore-footed dogies along.

The medic stuck with us a couple days, riding the wagon with Pete and Slim. But when he seen how slow we'd be, he put up a holler to take off. I couldn't see where he was doing Slim any good, and I was glad to get his weight off the wagon. I let him take a horse and Slim's saddle, and mustered him out.

At night, when we had grass and water, we all turned in and let the cows and horses scatter. It didn't work so bad, because after days like we had, they all were ready to settle down and feed, and it wasn't as big a job as some to gather them in the morning. But where we had to dry camp, and the grass was poor, two had to fight the cows all night and one the horses. And I made the cook stand watch with the rest of us. He blew up and threatened to quit, but I told him I'd shoot him on the spot if he tried to leave. I guess he seen I meant it, because he stuck.

IT TOOK us three weeks to cover ground we'd expected to get over in one. But if Rood had made off with the best horses, he left me the real men, and we finally made it into Hall, with all the men and horses. We were short a hundred head of cows and calves, but we knew where we'd left each one, and I was feeling plenty proud.

Slim hadn't spoke a word since he was hurt. But he was still alive. They had a little cap-and-ball hospital at the military post there, and I got him admitted, then called at the telegraph office and found a wire from the Old Man waiting for me. It carried authority for me to hire more men and write checks on the company for what we needed to keep moving.

It used to be, on drives like that, that the wagonboss carried his boss's checkbook, and could make or break him, according to the way he used the privilege. But outside of what we needed for the outfit, there wasn't nothing for me at Hall. I couldn't of hurt the company if I had been a mind to.

I made inquiries around and soon found out that Rood and his pals had come that way. They'd picked up fifty or sixty Indian horses off the reservation there, and had kept on moving. The authorities had picked up the trail, heading for Wyoming. I sent the Old Man another wire, telling about that. Then I went to work.

We were in pitiful condition, and I wouldn't have minded laying over a week or so, to get back on our feet. But, like I say, Hall was the Blackfoot Indian agency, and I didn't like to stay around with all them white men's buffalo on my hands. So I bought twenty off-color skates from the Indians and hired four discharged soldiers that wanted to get back to the States, and we hit the trail again.

East of Hall, we had the Wyoming mountains, and once we'd got into them, the going was easier. Had plenty grass and water, and no rock to cut the feet. The calves that had survived the lava began to get their heads up and fill out, and the cows picked up wonderful. I had all the help I needed, and there was some temptation to stall along and enjoy the trip. But my big aim was to ram the herd home and get out from under it, so we didn't dally much.

Even so, it was fall by the time we turned up the Laramie from the Platte. Grass was

brown and crickets chirping, and a morning fringe of ice on most the water holes. The Old Man was out to see us, and it was good to see his face as he rode among them blocky roans and reds, feeding his eyes on them.

It wasn't so nice to see when he told me he'd been in touch with the people at Fort Hall, and Slim was dead. When I mentioned Rood, he looked black enough to rain.

"The authorities intercepted him at South Pass City, and I got my horses back," he said. "I brought charges against him, along with the Indian Bureau people. But his crimes were committed in Idaho, and we have to extradite to prosecute. He's some shirt-tail kin of the Calley's that helped elect the Governor. He got in touch with them, and the Governor won't send him back. All they could do in South Pass was hold the horses and let all three thieves go. That tinhorn, Rood, is right here on the Bluegrass, now."

"On the Bluegrass?" I said, looking at him.

"Working for his kinfolks, the Calleys. Well, they earned him, and they can have him. Serves them damn well right."

I chewed that one pretty fine. The Calley boys' range adjoined the Shoe Sole, and the Old Man had had trouble with them for years. Like he said, the three of them had helped elect the Governor, whereas the Old Man had done his best to whip him. The Governor and the Calleys would go to any lengths to knock the Old Man down, even on a little issue like the hammerhead.

"Well, I'm sorry I botched things so," I said. "I should of hung him, right there in the lava."

"Then you'd have been as bad as he is," he told me. "It's hard to think about Slim. But hanging that piece of trash wouldn't of helped him any. You brought the herd through for him, and that's what counted. I'm just thankful you was there."

"I can't be so thankful," I said to him. "Not until I've settled up with Whitey."

"Now pull in your horns," he lectured me. "If there's any settling to do, it's up to me, not you. I hired him in the first place, and brought the whole thing on. The way he served you and Slim only hurt himself. You came out of it a bigger man."

"Big enough to fix his clock," I nodded.

But he still shook his head. "It's not worth making trouble for yourself, just to make some for a one-eyed jack like that. When colts like him get breachy and start jumping fences, they land in a hole. You know where they got the word 'renegade'?"

"From hammerheads like that one, I expect."

"It comes from the word 'renege,'" he told me, ready to make a speech at the drop of a hat. "He reneged on that man he worked for, in Oregon. He reneged on you and me. He'll treat the Calleys the same way, and pretty quick he'll have himself out on a limb. That kind make their own end."

CHAPTER THREE

The Courtin'

THE Old Man never told me in so many words to take over for Slim and run things. At first, he kind of acted as foreman himself. But there was a lot extra work processing and scattering the new cattle, and there was quite a bit of the detail that he didn't know about. I just saw things that needed doing, and went ahead with them, the same as when I was out in the lava. It seemed to be all right with the others, and pretty quick they started asking me for orders, like out in Idaho.

What with one thing and another, I didn't have no time to think about Whitey Rood. It was coming onto Thanksgiving before I even got into Amity to see Michele Terry, the girl I'd always figured I would marry as soon as I could see my way clear. Her father was old Bill Terry, branch manager for Wells Fargo. She was a little slip

of a thing, with light hair and big dark eyes, like a doe. I went for her from the minute I first seen her, and for some reason she went for me.

But you can't think much about marriage when you're working for forty a month and living in a bunkhouse. The best I'd been able to do was to see her a dozen or so times a year, and squire her to all the dances and parties I could find. But now all that was changed.

Now I was making a hundred a month, and had a cabin to myself. I'd talked it over with the Old Man, and he encouraged me.

"She is a mighty fine girl," he said. "And I think she knows a good ketch when she sees one. We'll help you fix up the cabin, right away."

"I haven't even asked her yet," I said.

"We'll get in to town, and do it," he said to me. "You expect her to come out here?"

The day I did go in, I practically took the place over. It was Sunday, and I had to get Joe Cross to open his store so I could buy new clothes, and the ring I'd had my eye on for a year. Then I got Jim Friend to open his barber shop and give me all the works. When I finally went calling, I smelled like a rose and even felt like one.

Mrs. Terry let me in. She was a pretty woman, just what I wanted Mike to be, when she got that that old. She'd always treated me fine, and I felt she approved of me. But she was different toward me, this time. Not unfriendly or anything, but kind of embarrassed and unhappy, like I'd come at the wrong time or something.

"Come right in, Ash," she said. "I'll call Michele."

She did call, but Mike kept me waiting quite a while. When she did come in, she looked different, too. Pretty as ever, but not in the same way. She didn't come to me and talk and laugh the way she used to do. Her eyes had a funny way of not looking at me, even when they were meeting mine.

To break the ice, I told her about my good luck and promotion.

"That's nice, Ash," she said. "I'm so glad."

But she was looking out the window, and I knew she hadn't even heard me. Not the way I wanted her to hear. Something was wrong. I fingered the ring I'd brought, and started feeling like the time Tom Bundy beat the tar out of me in Douglas. Like I was getting whipped, and couldn't do nothing about it.

"Well," I said, "I'll be able to git into town a little oftener now. I thought maybe we might take in the Thanksgiving dance, over in the school house."

She looked at me square then, and I could see how sad she felt. Sad for me, not for her.

"I'm sorry, Ash," she said. "I'm going with someone else."

I don't remember what we talked about, after that. I only know that I got away as quick as I could, and went down to the Cowmen's Bar. I don't very often get hold of any fighting whiskey. But that Sunday night I tried to clean the whole Calley outfit, and didn't quite get the job done.

It might have made a little sense, me crowding that fight and taking the licking I did, if Mickey Rood had been there. But he wasn't.

Maybe that's why I got in the fight, wondering where he was at that night.

I TOLD myself I wouldn't go to the Thanksgiving dance. But when the fiddles starting scraping, I was there. I had a pint of red-eye inside of me, too. But I wasn't feeling very joyful.

I was standing with the stags around the door when Mike came in, looking like something right out of a picture book. And I guess I'd known all along who she was coming with. Because it wasn't surprise I felt when I seen her there with Whitey Rood. It wasn't any feeling I had ever felt before. I wanted to kill a man.

At first, I started to edge back in the crowd, where they wouldn't see me, and maybe slip away. But the liquor was working on me, and instead I pushed up to where they couldn't miss seeing me. I never took my eyes off them. By staring at them, I made them glance at me.

Mike's eyes still had that not-looking-at-me expression in them. But Whitey looked at me. And when he did, I saw he hated me worse than I did him—and not for anything I'd done to him, but because of what he'd done to me.

He danced with her six times in a row, and acted so possessive that it was hard for me to contain myself. All the while I watched, I kept asking myself what a girl like Mike could possibly see in a boob like him.

But even while I was talking to myself, I knew the answer. No matter what he'd done, he was tall and handsome, in a winning, boyish way, and had a pair of shoulders that talked every time he moved. He was dressed in store clothes, the same as I was. But he wore his like he belonged in them. I wore mine like I'd bought them in a hurry, sight-unseen, because I was embarrassed to be caught thinking so much about my looks as to buy a suit of clothes—which I had.

When Whitey finally relinquished her, he headed for the door to get a drink or smoke outside. I joined the crowd of young bucks that had clustered around Mike, and started wading through. She was talking and laughing until she saw me. Then she stopped, and looked halfway scared. But I was feeling my liquor, and this other thing. My hide was thick as iron.

"Mike," I said to her, and my voice sounded funny, even to me, "I got to talk to you."

"Hello, Ash," she said to me. "I thought it was a freight train coming."

She told me the dance was promised. But when the fiddles started, I took hold of her and whirled her away from the others. I tried to look down at her, but all I could see was the top of her head.

"Ash!" I heard her say after a while. "Don't. You're hurting me."

I found I was holding her the way you hold something you've bulldogged. I guess I wasn't so wrong, at that.

"Mike," I said, "I got to talk to you."

"You said that once before," she said, looking at my shoulder.

"It's about this Rood," I said. "He's nobody for you to git mixed up with. He's a—he's a bunch quitter."

The words just slipped out. I knew as quick as I'd said that they wouldn't make no sense to her. She punshed back and looked at me, straight this time. But it wasn't a way she'd ever looked at me before.

"He's a *what?*" she said.

"A no-good nothing," I said, wishing I had the words to say what I was thinking. "He's not reliable. You can't trust him. He'll lead you on—make you think he's what he looks to be, just like a mare of his I knew once. You take a chance on him, and he'll jump the fence."

She pushed back and looked at me again. "You're drunk," she said.

"Maybe," I said, wanting to punish her. "A man's got to do something. But, drunk or sober, I know a polecat when I see one."

She stopped dancing and tore herself away. She was chesty, in a nice way, and breathing hard. I'll never forget the way she looked.

"He's told me all what happened, on the trip from Oregon!" she said to me. "How you all were against him, and what you did to him. I think it was terrible!"

We looked at each a minute. I never could think of what to say in cases like that, until it's too late. All I could think of was a lot of things that wouldn't do to say. I just felt futile.

"You had something to say to me," she said, more riled than I'd ever seen her. "Well, I've something to say to you. You're trying to bully me the way you bullied

Cotton. I won't stand for it, any more than he did. The only reason I danced with you is I wanted to tell you we're going to be married!"

She turned around and left me. I watched her go, and couldn't believe it had happened. After a while I realized I was standing all alone out in the middle of the floor. Everybody else had stopped to listen to us and look at us. Now everybody was watching me.

I got outside as quick as I could. I stood a minute on the porch, my eyes blinded by the dark. Then I see this Rood, standing down at the bottom of the steps, with the Calleys and some the Calley riders. They were drinking, and Whitey had the bottle in his hand.

That made me frantic, and I don't know why. I'd always figured it was all right for me to take a nip now and again, as long as I didn't overdo it. Sometimes, even when I was going to see Mike, I would meet some the boys, and we'd be sociable that way. She didn't like it when I did, but I could usually kid her out of it. But the sight of him down there with the bottle, with her inside the school house looking the way I'd always wanted her to look at me, made me kind of crazy.

"Well, I'll be go-to-hell!" Whitey said, when he seen me. "If that ain't Jardine's new foot-wipe up there, I'll kiss your hand. Hey, Ashley! When you going to make it right with me for setting you up in your new job?"

I didn't answer him. Not in words. I started down the steps toward him, and he took a swing at me. I got inside it, and hit him just one time. He went down and stayed.

I looked at the Calleys, to see if they would take it up. They wouldn't, and I was disappointed. I had my back up for a fight.

"Whitey," I told the hammerhead, "I better not ever hear of you mistreating Mike Terry, understand?"

He didn't say nothing, and I started off. The minute my back was turned, he started getting up. Started talking fight, and calling me hard names. But I didn't go back. I figured that beating Whitey's head off wouldn't make nothing any different, except to drive Mike farther from me. I went down to the Cowmen's Bar again, and had my fight there.

There was a Texas drover crew in town and the damage we done cost me two months' wages, after. I was a hard sight when I got back to the ranch next day, and the Old Man looked at me the way I'd seen him look at horses that went bad on him.

"Well," he said, "I hope you've got it out of your system. You've been wanting a good trouncing, ever since your last one."

"It wasn't Rood that gave it to me," I told him, just like he'd said it was. "It was a whole damned Texas trail crew."

"Same thing, isn't it?" he said to me. "When you going to get married and knock off all this foolishness?"

I looked at him, and couldn't say nothing that meant anything. All I could do was swear.

"Looks like you *haven't* got it out of your system," he said. "You better go back to town."

I COULD see later the Old Man was right, and I should of gone back to town—not for no added binge, neither, but to put up the damnedest fight of my life for Mike. But I always had a way of turning away from the things I really wanted, and making them seek me.

I guess I was something like an uncle I'd had once who would never run to catch a train or a horse car, for fear it would go off and leave him looking silly. Sometimes you'd see him coming toward a car that was getting ready to pull out, and the closer he got the slower he would walk, just to show he didn't give a damn. Me, I'd always wanted to be Jardine's foreman. But I was careful never to let nobody guess it. Even

when I got my chance, out there in Idaho, I gave everybody else a chance to take over before I stepped up. As things happened, the job just kind of went to me by default, and I was glad it had.

What I mean is, I was modest, and liked to do my best, and show what I was and what I could do. Then, when something big came up, instead of having to ask for it, I'd have it handed to me on a silver platter, and could act surprised when I wasn't surprised at all.

Well, I was some like that, with Mike. She knew what I was, and how I felt. I'd lowered myself to her once, and she'd walked off and left me, with everybody watching. I'd made a run for the horse car once, and it went off and left me. Now I was dragging my feet, like that reluctant uncle I'd used to know.

I didn't even go to town for three, four months. But I kept posted on what went on. I heard they figured at first on a Christmas wedding. But just before the holidays, Rood and the Calleys parted company, just like the Old Man had predicted, and the ceremony was postponed.

The Calleys had had Whitey mavericking for them—rounding up unmarking cows and calves on the range and branding them in the Calley iron at so much a head, the way all the big layouts used to do. This Whitey had been taking their pay, but was branding the mavericks in his own iron, and they got onto him.

It appeared the Calleys still felt responsible for him, and offered to let him stay if he'd sign his rustler brand over to them, along with all the stuff he'd put his sign on, and promise to do better after that. But our hammerhead had a fair start towards a cow herd then, and wouldn't deal. Instead, he jumped the fence again, and took up a place on Sybille Creek, and started calling himself a rancher.

When I heard that, I hoped maybe Mike would remember what I'd said, and put two and two together, and quit while she was still ahead. But they got married in March, as quick as Whitey had raised a little shanty on his claim, and that was that. I'd missed the train, and I knew it wouldn't be coming back.

I took to going into town every twice in a while, to drown my sorrows out and look for fun. I killed lots of time and drinks in Jill Holcomb's honkatonk.

I even had a couple nasty fights over them girls of Jill's. And I expect I was a difficult customer, all the way around. One of 'em crowned me with a bottle once, then got my gun and said she was going to kill me.

"Tom Ashley," she said to me, "you're the meanest mortal man I ever laid eyes on."

I was so surprised I couldn't hardly talk.

"Now what in the hell have I done wrong?" I begged to know.

"It ain't what you do in hell that's going to git you killed," she said. "It's what you do right here. You don't have to act like a dog, just because you are one!"

Well, that kind of woke me up. I took a good long look at myself, and decided then and there to straighten up. That night, I swore off boozing and girling too. After that, I avoided town the same way I avoided the Sybille. I started tending to business at the ranch again. And, early that spring, the Old Man sent me back to Oregon for more of them blocky cattle.

He didn't go out with us that year, but trusted the whole thing to me. There wasn't no banking service then, like you got now, and on long trips like that to a different part of the country, you had to carry cash along with you.

I took a full of ten men along with me, not to risk hiring strangers out there another time. We entrained at Cheyenne and rode the U. P. as far as Kelton, Utah, where the rails bent south to California. We rode the Holladay stages from there to Baker, and I worried some about that money. But I'd picked my men as careful

as I could, and nothing happened to it on the way.

As quick as we'd unstaged at Baker, I put Moss Tappan and Jim Click to buying what horses we would need, and rounding up some wagons and an outfit. I went right to buying cows, and by the first of May, we had hit the trail again with three thousand head—she-stuff, calves, big steers; anything I could get.

Being all mixed up that way, the herd was harder to trail even than the one we'd had the year before. But I had a good crew and horse string, not a bunch quitter in the outfit, and that made all the difference. We got through without no trouble we couldn't handle, and were back for fair time, in the fall.

Right off, I got the big news about Mike and her hammerhead. That spoiled colt had gone from mavericking to tampering with branded stuff that summer, and the Calleys and Jardine had both filed charges against him—the first time in history they'd ever got together on one thing. Somebody had tipped Whitey off, and he had skun out, about six weeks before.

"He take his wife along?" I said, casual as I could.

"Not that breachy buttermilk calf," the Old Man said. "Didn't even let her know he was wanted. Just saddled up one morning, and said he had to go to Douglas for a day or so. She hasn't seen nor heard of him since then."

"She staying alone, up on their place?" I said.

The Old Man shook his head. "The court put the place and all on it in escrow, until mine and Calleys' claims are satisfied. The girl is all broke up. She's back living with her folks."

"So our Whitey's jumped the fence again!" I said, trying to feel something, but not feeling very much.

"He's reneged on everybody he ever was teamed up with. You, me, the Calleys, that Oregon cowman—and now that little girl . . . I hear she's filing for divorce," he added, too damned innocent to be innocent at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

Return of Cotton Rood

I DIDN'T go right in to see her, the way I wanted. I figured I'd better give her a little time. I didn't want it to look like I was saying 'I told you so.' But I saw her two or three times at a distance. I was plenty relieved to see that the one thing I'd worried most about hadn't happened to her, and she was still pretty enough to knock me into a loop. But in some ways she did look like she'd been run over by a wild horse.

As always happens, there were grins about her, and talk, even in the bars. "She sure burned her little haunches," I heard Gut Trompee remark one day, when she passed the Cowmen's. "Wonder how she likes setting on the blisters?"

The worst of it all was, he cut his grin at me.

"Gut," I said, "ain't you got any troubles of your own to worry about?"

He put down his glass, and looked at me. "What you so touchy about?" he wanted to know. "I was thinking, after the way she served you, you'd be all over that."

"You do your thinking to yourself," I said, "or you and me will tangle."

He put on a fighting grin. "Well, pardon me, all to hell," he said.

"Yeah," I told him. "You and all the others like you."

Everybody was looking at us then, and I got out before we mixed it. Just as I hit the street, I see Mike come out of Trimble's store, carrying a sack. She stopped and I thought for a minute she was going to go back in, pretending like she didn't see me. But then she faced up to me, though her eyes had that way of not looking at me, still.

I took off my hat. "Hello, Mike," I said. "It's good to see you."

"Hi, Ash," she said, plenty careless. "I didn't know you were back."

She blushed then, like she hadn't meant to let it slip she knew I had been away. She started to walk past me, but I took her sack and went along.

"Mike," I said, "There's a dance out on the new Bluecreek bridge this coming Saturday. Why don't we take it in?"

"Ash," she said, like she was going to cry, "why do you keep bothering with me? You tried to tell me what Whitey was. I wouldn't listen."

"Well, my goodness," I said. "You talk like you was the first one he ever fooled. What about me and Old Man Jardine, and the Calleys, and plenty others old enough to know better? We all had to learn the same way."

"Ash," she said, "you're so darn good, you make me want to cry."

"Don't cry about my goodness," I told her, thinking of what that girl at Jill's had said. "There's two schools of thought, about my morals."

By then we'd reached her gate, and she was talking to my shoulder again. "Thanks for asking for asking me to the dance, Ash. But I don't believe I better go."

"I'll be by at six o'clock," I said. "I'll borrow the Old Man's team and buggy."

She smiled a little then, for the first time, and put her hand on my arm. I was as thrilled as the first time I had kissed her.

"Come in, so I can show you to Mother," she said to me. "She told me you wouldn't ever look at me again."

MIKE'S divorce came through early that summer, and we were married the next week, out at Moccasin. The Jardines couldn't have been better to us if they'd been our own folks. They built a new cabin for us, back in the pines a mile or above the ranch, and Mrs. Jardine helped Mike fix it up the way she wanted. They gave us a big wedding, in their parlor, and had the Bishop of Wyoming up to tie the knot. After, there was a big barbecue outside, with most the people in the country there. There was a dance in the loft of the big barn, which was empty of hay at that season, and plenty jugs went around—which I passed.

The Old Man told me I could register a brand and start running cattle along with his, so I could someday be on my own. With a start like that, we couldn't help but get along. And the first month or two was just like a dream for me, both at the time and to look back on.

Things weren't exactly the way they had been once, of course. But, in some ways, that made it all the better. I mean, we'd both been through the mill, and could appreciate what we had. I did, anyhow, and Mike showed me a hundred different times a day that she did, too.

But there was a shadow over us all the time, even when we pretended it wasn't there. Our Whitey had got to be quite a figure in the country now. He was getting all kinds of publicity, in talk and in the papers, and we couldn't help hearing all about him. We made it a point not to talk about him, but he was always in the air.

Right off, he'd got a gang of toughs around him, and went to holding up the treasure coaches that ran between Deadwood and the U. P. at Cheyenne. They killed half a dozen drivers and shotgun men, and robbed and abused the passengers. Then, all at once, the company brought the Pinkertons into it, and knocked the gang off with just one raid. Killed three and captured four of them. But Whitey's name wasn't on either list, and the story went around that he made a deal with the company to sell the others out.

The company denied that story. But then they almost had to, in order to stay in business.

The next we heard of him, he was with a horse-thief syndicate that stole horses in

Montana and sold them in Wyoming; then picked up horses in Wyoming to sell to them they'd robbed up north.

In time, they smashed that ring, too, with or without help from the inside. But they didn't capture any Whitey Rood.

After that, he turned up in Idaho, with a gang that preyed on the gold camps. Up there, they grabbed the whole bunch, Whitey with the others, and that time it looked like he had maybe come to his rope's end. But he turned state's evidence, and got off with a five-year sentence. Then he killed a guard and broke out of the pen, and dropped from sight.

He was just too breachy to hold.

Mike and I had a kind of honeymoon trip that fall. I'd been too busy to leave at the time we were spliced, and the Old Man wanted me to accompany his cattle shipments to Chicago and act as his agent, so we decided to wait and make that our wedding trip. Mike hadn't never been east of Cheyenne, so we took in New York and Boston and Washington, and saw all the sights. But even back there we couldn't get away from Whitey.

He was riding high right then, and them big eastern papers was hard up for news, and they made more of him than they had of the Custer Wild West Show. They called him the Blond Terror and the Artful Dodger and the Doll-Faced Demon, and treated him like he was something big. We couldn't turn around without we run into that claptrap about him. And the worst of it was, we couldn't bring ourselves to talk about him.

There he was, all around us. But I didn't feel like it was my place to mention him. And Mike, she couldn't mention him to me. Outside of that one time, when we first met outside the saloon, she never had said his name to me.

At first, I tried to keep the papers away from her. But sometimes I'd catch her

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reading them on the sly. I'd wait for her to say something then, and she wouldn't. And I knew then she still had him under her skin. Not the way she had him once. I never did think that, but she'd been married to him after all. He was in bad trouble now, and it was only natural she should think of things.

I only wished she would talk about him, but she wouldn't.

So, Whitey went on our honeymoon with us, and spoiled it. And he spoiled our life when we got home. After he broke of the Idaho pen, he was really news. And bigger news than just the papers; you heard things you didn't read, and the word was around that now even the outlaw brotherhood was on to him, so he was hunted on every side.

A lot of bad men had long careers out here in the West, but them that did were in good with the people, like Butch Cassidy and Carlyle, or else they got a stand-in with the law, like Hickok and the Earps and Tom Horn, and some others I could mention. This Whitey Rood, he didn't have no stand-in with nobody, unless maybe it was Mike. That's what used to haunt me.

I figured it out, careful, plenty times. He wasn't likely to go back to Oregon, on account of that old charge Stacey had brought against him, for theft of one horse and saddle and bridle. When you're wanted all around, you can't risk being arrested on any charge, because once they got you got, you are got. He couldn't go to Montana or Idaho, because they really wanted him there. But nobody wanted him in Wyoming except the stage company, and he'd made a deal with them. As long as he left them alone, they wouldn't bother him.

That still left him a lot of country to operate in, if he'd been a growed-up. But he wasn't, and I knew him well enough to know he wouldn't chance it on his own. I mean, that kind want help and company when things start to piling up. And as far as I knew the only person in the world that might give him help was Mike. Or maybe me. For all he was, I felt sorry for him. And, dumb as they are in other ways, people like that always know who's soft.

IT WAS late the next summer, before things started coming to a head. And it wasn't easy waiting. We both knew what the deal was, even if we couldn't talk about it. We both knew he was coming. The only question in our minds was when.

Towards the end, the slightest noise outside the house would bring our eyes together, and we'd just set and wait, not even able to talk about what we waited for.

You see, Mike and I had been married for more than a year, and outside the first two weeks, we hadn't had no happiness, no time together in any kind of privacy. He was there, all the time, as much as if he'd moved in with us, and we all ate and slept together, every day. I used to find myself wishing he'd show up, so we could get over with whatever we all were going to do.

I always left the cabin early, around six o'clock, right after breakfast. This particular morning, I got down to the main ranch and got the boys all lined out on their duties for the day. Then somebody told me about an outlaw colt we had that had jumped out of a corral we had and into a twenty-foot gulch that bordered it, and broke his leg.

Any one of them could of put the poor thing out of its misery. But they didn't. They left it up to me. That's one the things a foreman's for.

Even with us expecting Whitey back, I didn't carry no gun around the place. Not at seven o'clock in the morning. There were guns a lot closer, but a foreman don't borrow from the hands when he's short.

I headed back up to the cabin, to pick up my .44.

Back in the trees, about halfway between the yard and our cabin, there was an old stable that nobody used no more. I was about even with it when I heard a horse whinny, over in that direction. There was

a snag of a barbwire fence around that old barn, and my first thought was that one of our ponies was caught in that wire.

I rode over to look, and found a horse, but it wasn't caught in the wire. It was tied inside the stable, with nothing but dust to eat. It was a rangy, cross-country horse, and had been rode hard sometime lately. It was cold now, so I figured it had been tied there sometime in the night. It was branded a Box Bar B, which didn't tell me a thing. The saddle was single-rigged, like they rode in Oregon. There was a rifle scabbard on it, but the rifle wasn't there.

I began to know whose horse it was then, and I started to feel a little creepy. I peeked out the door, and half expected to see Whitey out there laying for me.

I didn't see Whitey. But I did find boot tracks that had been made since the dew. I followed them, and they made straight for our cabin. When I got to the edge of our clearing, I saw where he'd stood long enough to smoke a dozen or so cigarettes. I knew then he'd waited there until he seen me leave. I knew he was inside the house, with Mike, alone.

ALL the way back to my horse, I tried to study what to do. I could ride down to the yard and borrow a gun, after all. I could even bring some the boys back with me. But I knew that wouldn't do. For one thing, with Mike in there with him, so there couldn't be a siege. For another, it was personal business, between us three. Anyhow, I wanted to get up there.

I rode fast until I hit the clearing. Then I eased up and tried to make it look like a casual call. I rode slow and even whistled.

Mike was alone in the kitchen when I stepped inside. But she had been cooking again, and a newspaper covered a plate and cup on the table that I pretended not to see. Mike's face was white, and once more her eyes didn't look at me.

"What brings you back this time of day?" she asked.

"We got more trouble," I said. "That brown outlaw colt that give us all the trouble jumped the fence and broke his laig. I've got to shoot him."

While I talked, I walked to the hatrack and started buckling on my gun.

"I hate to hear of you killing him," Mike said, sounding tight and strained.

"I hate the job of having to," I couldn't keep from saying. "He would have been the best horse on the place, if he had only settled down."

I took my time with the belt, pretending to have trouble with the buckle. I watched the pantry curtain, without appearing to, and thought I saw it move. I figured that that was where he was, and I thought of pulling my gun and shooting blind, and just taking my chances. But I couldn't. Not with Mike there.

I knew Mike awful well, and I could see that she was scared. But I knew she wasn't scared of me, nor of Whitey either. It was herself that she feared. She still didn't have the hammerhead out of her system. Until she did, my hands were tied.

"By the way, Mike," I said. "I got to run in to town, after a while, to see about some lumber. I wondered if you'd like to go along."

She looked at me and through me the way she could, and waved a hand at the dishpan she hadn't got to yet. Mike who'd take the dishes right from in front of you to get them washed.

"I don't know," she said. "I'll have to see how I stack up with what I've got to do. Why don't you come back, in about an hour?"

"You think you can make up your mind in that time?" I said.

"I'll know whether I can get this mess cleaned up," she said.

I looked at the clock above the stove. It said fifteen after eight.

"All right," I said. "I'll give you an hour."

I didn't whistle, riding away. I took the

trail toward the ranch. When I was below the stable, I tied my horse in the trees, and backtracked to the stable. The ridgerunner looked like a fine animal, and I petted him and talked to him. After about an hour, I looked at my watch. It was eight-thirty.

I kept wondering what was going on, up at the cabin. I didn't like thinking about it.

I wasn't afraid now that Whitey would try any violence. I knew Mike was stronger than he was, in everything but muscle. I knew nothing would happen that she didn't want to happen. What she wanted, I wouldn't oppose.

After another hour or so, I heard somebody coming. I stood up and tried to figure if it was one or two. I knew if she came with him, I couldn't do nothing but turn my horse over to them, and let them go. If Whitey came alone—well, that was something else.

Whitey was alone. He stood in the doorway when he saw me.

"You son of buck!" he practically screamed at me.

They were the only words either of us said. I had a whole speech ready, but I didn't get to give it. He started throwing down on me, with his rifle.

My pistol was still in my belt. But I beat him by a city mile. I got three bullets into him. He missed me a yard.

It was the first man I'd ever killed. But I didn't feel a thing, except relief. It was just like I'd killed the outlaw colt that was still suffering. I still gave him my speech, knowing that he couldn't hear it.

"You'll be good from here on, Whitey," I said to him.

I'M NOT quick at thinking. I was almost back to the house before it got through my thick skull that maybe Whitey had only come to the stable to wait for Mike—that maybe she was waiting for me up there, to tell me she was going. It just hit me all at once. I hated to go in.

The minute I was off my horse, Mike was outside and in my arms. She was crying so hard and her face was pressed so close against my shoulder I had to strain to know what she was saying.

"Oh, Ash!" it sounded like. "Thank God you've come. Whitey has been here."

"Whitey?" I said, acting dumb.

"Oh, yes!" I had to listen close again. "He came right after you left, the first time. He made me fix him breakfast. He was hiding in the pantry, when you came back. He wants me to go away with him."

I went all dead and stony inside. I patted her on the head. "Well," I said. "You want to go?"

"He's bad, Ash," she blubbered. "Oh, he's evil. He's the meanest man I ever saw."

I winced when she said that. "What did he do?" I said.

"He said he'd kill you, if I didn't go. He said he'd wait by the trail to the ranch, and if I didn't come by a quarter after nine, he would shoot you when you rode back up. He said he would kill me, if I left the cabin. And he will. I know. He'll try to kill us both."

I could see the clock through the door behind her. It said just nine. I laughed and hugged her.

"Honey," I said, "you're way behind the times. He's already tried."

She pushed back, and really looked at me again. "What do you mean?" she said.

"I mean he tried for me, ahead of time, and didn't make it," I said. "I guess he knew you wouldn't come."

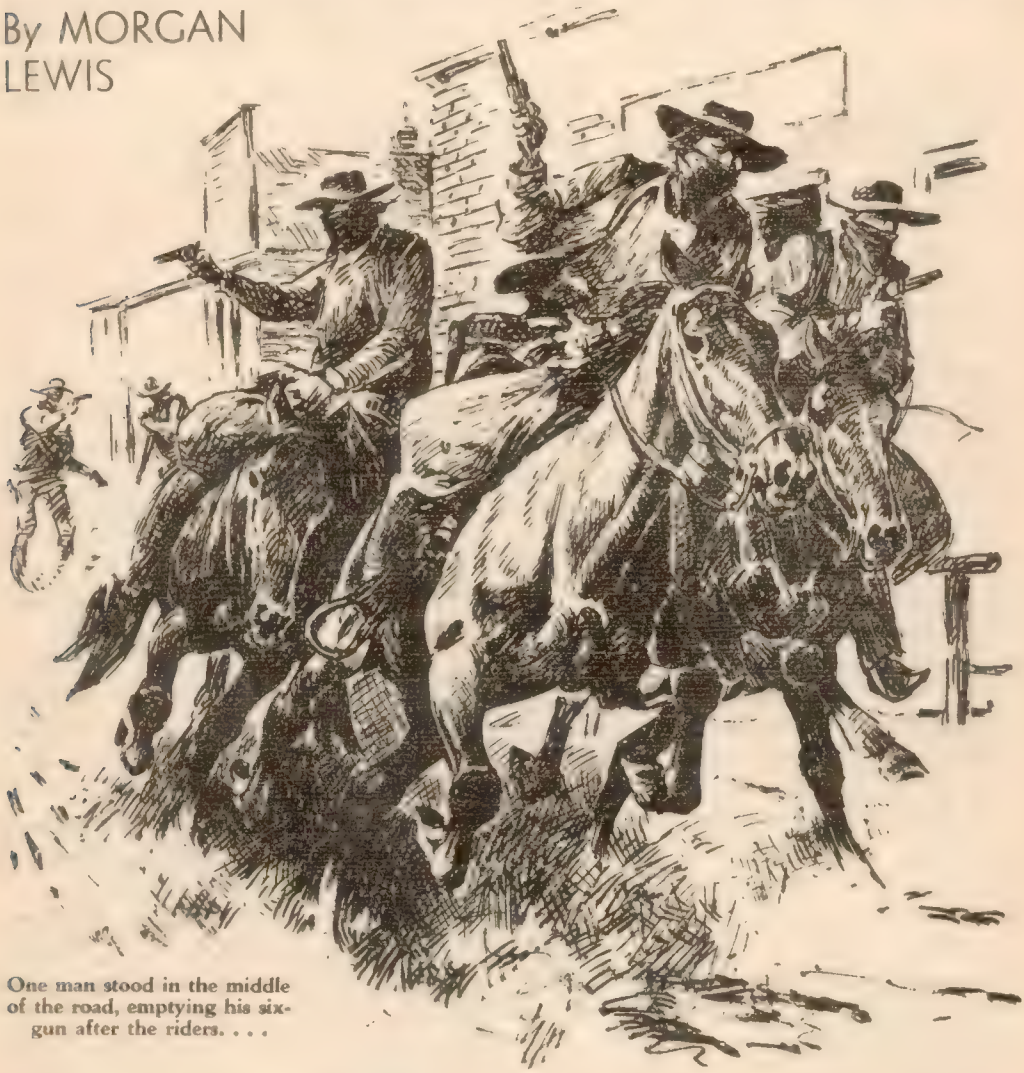
She cried harder than ever then. But she clung to me tighter, too. Just burrowed her head under my chin, and howled for free.

And I knew then we were shed of the hammerhead at last.

"Now change your clothes, and powder your nose, while I do a couple of chores," I said when she'd cried it out. "You and me are going to town." ⁂ ⁂ ⁂

THE WILD STRAIN

By MORGAN LEWIS



One man stood in the middle of the road, emptying his six-gun after the riders. . . .

They grew tough in Elk City . . . like old Luden Strait, the banker, who'd been a heller in his younger days, and Clance Yallow, the marshal, who could lick any man in the county. . . . And then there was that soft-spoken stranger, Jason Lodge!

IT WAS late afternoon when the Broken Run stage pulled up before the doorway of the Elk City Bank. Luden Strait in shirt sleeves across from his desk and ran a hand through his thick gray hair. "Hustle out and give 'em a hand, Ludy, boy."

Something in that deep voice made Ludy glance up so quickly that he dropped the ruler he was trying to balance. He hadn't

known pop was worried. He went out onto the plank walk and helped the driver carry in the express box while up on the lofty seat the guard relaxed from cat-eyed vigilance, shotgun across his knees.

The new teller, Jason Lodge, looked on in his silent fashion as they carried the box through the gate in the railing that divided the bank and put it down beside the black safe in the far corner.

"You're late," pop observed, and began stowing currency into the safe. "Any trouble?"

"No trouble. Hoss cast a shoe." The driver shifted his quid and spat ringingly into the brass cuspidor. "But Pete hugged that shotgun closer'n a bride. Two holdups in six weeks'd make anybody nervous. Reckon he figured some of the bad bunch might've drifted this way."

"Gosh!" Ludy's blue eyes sparkled. "Would you have shot it out with 'em?"

The driver waggled his head. "I'm hired to drive this stage, bub, not make the missus a widow. Pete might've—that's his job—but them boys shoot awful fast an' straight. The guard in that holdup over beyond Broken Run last week had three holes in him, an' he never pulled a trigger."

Pop shut the safe door with its red, exploding sun. "Ludy here would like a holdup once a day and twice on Sundays."

The driver grinned. "Reckon he comes by it honest, Mr. Strait." He picked up his box and departed.

Ludy jiggled on his feet and a bright feather of hair bobbed on his head. The driver's remark amused him. It was hard to realize that solid, dignified pop had once been a wild young cowpuncher down in Texas. He must have been a regular hellbiter.

"Reckon we can call it a day, Jay." Pop went over to the rack for coat and wide-brimmed black hat. "It's hot as sin."

Jason Lodge shucked his black sleeve protectors and came from behind the wicket, moving silently for a big man, despite his slight limp. "Ought to get in another hour's work," he drawled.

"We'll get Cynthia to give us a hand in the morning." Luden Strait bit the end off a cigar and took out the silver matchbox that anchored one end of the heavy gold chain. "Mrs. Strait says it ain't genteel for a young lady to work in a public place. But nothing ever bothers Cynthia, an' it's a way of taming her down a mite."

Ludy bounced with a hand on the rail. "Don't forget you're comin' to supper, Jay."

Jay nodded and slanted a gray felt over his eyes. His hair was black as ebony and his skin had a dark, coppery tone. He went out while Ludy continued to bounce.

Pop lifted an eyebrow. "I'm the last to hear things. . . . Who asked him?"

"Cyn, I reckon. . . . Why, pop?"

His father slowly tugged his moustache, the way he did when someone asked for a tough loan.

Ludy quit bouncing. "Gee, don't you like him?"

"I like him from what I've seen in the two months he's been here," pop said slowly, "but it ain't natural for a feller only twenty-five to be so quiet. A man should sow his wild oats when he's young."

"Gosh, I reckon three years in the army would quiet most anybody. . . . Say, pop, I know where he got that limp! It was on Cemetery Ridge in the battle of Gettysburg. Those old rebs was chargin', cannon was bangin' 'n' bullets were just whizzin' past. One hit Jay in the leg an' put him down—that was all saved his life!"

His father looked down his nose. "Did Jay say that?"

Ludy wriggled. "Well—he said he stopped a bullet on Cemetery Ridge."

When pop laughed the steerhead charm on his watch chain jiggled. "I reckon, sonny, a fifteen-year-old has got to make a hero out of somebody. But don't blow him up too big." He ruffled the boy's yellow

hair. "The way you're growin' I'll have to put a rock on your head. . . .Let's go home."

LUDY watched him mount the bay beside the tie-rail, lift his hand to angular Sheriff Dunn lounging in the doorway of his office across the road, and ride off down Main Street. Pop never walked if he could ride. But Ludy liked to walk. He saw more.

Starting down the street his eye fell upon the legend on the bank window: LUDEN STRAIT, PRESIDENT, and unconsciously his shoulders squared. Being the son of Luden Strait took considerable living up to. Pop had a reputation for never going back on his word and never ducking an obligation.

Then he saw Jason Lodge come out of a shop down the street and he galloped along the walk and caught him at the runway to Purdy's livery stable. "You comin' over to our house now, Jay?"

"After I get rid of this beard, button." Jay rubbed his lean, square jaw.

"I'll go along with you," Ludy offered. "An' say, you'll miss your ride t'night. . . . Is it helpin' your leg any, Jay?" His eyes went ahead to where Clance Yallow, town marshal, was adjusting the hang of his gun before the Steerhead Saloon.

"Some. It stretches the muscles." But Ludy was watching the marshal who had turned and was waiting for them.

As they came up, Clance Yallow placed himself in the middle of the walk, a long-bodied, heavy-muscled man with a fighter's jaw. He nodded to Ludy and put his hooded amber eyes upon the teller. "You were in Broken Run last week?"

Jay nodded and the marshal hooked thumbs in gunbelt. "Why?"

"Bank business," Ludy volunteered.

"I'm askin' him." Yallow did not shift his eyes and Ludy felt the hard thrust of his dislike and was amazed—everybody liked Jay.

"You've had your answer," Jay said. "If you want to know more, ask Luden Strait."

Yallow spread heavy, muscular legs. "Might be you could tell me things he couldn't. It don't take all day to ride twelve miles to Broken Run and back."

"Gosh, Clance!" Ludy slapped his leg in annoyance. "Bankin' ain't done in a minute. There's talkin' to do an' papers to be signed an'—you ask pop."

"Don't try to explain banking to the marshal," Jay said. "It's a little out of his line."

The blunt, muscled face of Yallow went a shade darker. Marshal of Elk City because he could whip any man in town, he was jealous of his position. "I have the feelin'," he said softly, "you an' me are going to have trouble."

A light flickered in Jay's gray eyes, turning them jade green. Ludy felt a heavy, charged tension in the air, as before a thunderstorm. Then Jay took a deep breath and scrubbed his chest with his knuckles. "No reason for trouble," he mildly observed. "You stay on your side the fence and I'll stay on mine." He brushed past the marshal and went on at his long, unhurried pace.

"Gosh!" Ludy swallowed his disappointment and ducked around Yallow. Maybe Jay didn't know that you couldn't be so—so, well, kind of mild to a man like Clance Yallow. He threw a sidewise glance at the big teller and said diffidently, "Jay, you—you don't want to let Clance ride you that way an'—an'. . . ." His voice died out. People in Elk City didn't pry into a man's past or offer advice.

"A man in a bank," Jay said solemnly, "can't afford to be mixed up in street brawls. He's got to be, well, dignified. Look at your father."

"Oh, sure," Ludy agreed strongly, "you can't fight Clance — nobody can — but couldn't you kind of stand up to him more?"

Jay grinned. "Only way to stand up to Clance is to knock him down. That's all he understands." Ludy grinned back half-heartedly. He wasn't sure he had made his point.

They turned up Antelope and in the middle of the block came to Santee's boarding house. It was Ludy's first visit and he followed Jay down the broad center hall to a square corner room at the back overlooking the stable where Jay kept his long-legged sorrel.

Jay waved to the bed. "Best seat in the house." He half-emptied a big pitcher into the white bowl on the washstand while Ludy flung himself upon the bed and hung his knees over the footboard. Through the side window was a clear view of Deception Ridge towering above intervening housetops. "You been up on Deception, Jay?"

"A couple of times, but it's hard on a horse. Why do they call it Deception?"

"It fools you. Looks like a shortcut into the hills but there's no way down the other side. You have to go around the point and come back through the valley."

Jay nodded absently and rubbed his chin. "Guess I'll see if Ma Santee's got some hot water to spare. Be right back."

Ludy lay quiet for half a minute, the limit of his endurance. He got up and ambled to the window, swinging his arms for coolness. Across the wide width of Santee's side yard Mrs. Murphy was hanging wash, her mouth full of clothespins. He sat sideways on an old army blanket on the wide window ledge, and something hard under the blanket gouged him. He turned back a fold—and his eyes went wide.

The gun had a wicked beauty. Its stock was of some dark, polished wood and the long barrel gleamed bluely. A slender tube mounted on the barrel ran its length. He drew a deep breath and picked up the gun—and it's weight amazed him. It would heft thirty or forty pounds, he judged. Etched into the barrel's blue steel were the words, J. B. BLANCH & SON, LONDON.

The tube puzzled him and he brought the gun to his shoulder. Immediately Mrs. Murphy jumped to the other end of the tube. He could see the sweat standing out on her red face, and her freckles. He lifted the muzzle and the timbered slope of Deception Ridge came into sharp focus, just as though it weren't over a mile away.

"Gosh!" Then a feeling of guilt made him put the gun down and cover it. He had unintentionally pried into something that was none of his business. Sitting down on the bed he wished he had not lifted the blanket.

Jay returned with a small pitcher. He stripped to the waist, muscles rippling smoothly under the pink skin, and stirred up lather in his shaving mug.

Ludy wistfully felt his own smooth cheek and stood up. He had intended staying but now felt ill at ease. "Reckon I'll have to get along, Jay. Ma will skin me if I ain't slicked up."

Jay winked at him in the mirror and he ambled out and went on up Antelope, past homes set in deep lawns, backed by stables and carriage houses. This street had been only a pair of wheel tracks made by lumber wagons coming down from Deception Ridge when Luden Strait built here.

Finding the gun was disturbing but it somehow increased his admiration for Jay, and Ludy wished that he, too, was tall and dark with a war record and a mysterious rifle wrapped in a blanket.

CYNTHIA'S blue dress was a spot of coolness on the shaded porch when Ludy came up the steps. "Yeow!" he howled at the tall girl whose curly hair was yellow as his own. "I'll bet ma had to hog-tie you to get you into that dress!"

She took his head in strong white hands and gently pounded it against the wall. "Don't forget I'm four years older than you are, and if you say anything to Jay I'll—" She bared white teeth and snapped at his ear.

Ludy released himself, wriggling down upon the floor. She certainly couldn't wrestle in that dress. "Say, we just met Clance Yallow. He tried to start trouble with Jay."

"That Clance Yallow!" Cynthia planted fists on slim hips; her blue eyes flashed. "He's never happy unless he's having a fight! What did he say?"

"Well, Jay was in Broken Run the day of the holdup 'n' Clance wanted to know what he was doin'."

Cynthia bit her lip. She walked to the rail and silently stared down at the poplars stretching their long shadows across the dusty road.

Ludy got up by sections and went into the house.

He abruptly stopped in the hall as pop's voice came to him from the parlor. "He might be all right in the bank," pop was saying, "but wrong in the family."

"Oh, it's not that serious," ma said quickly. "He seems so nice."

Pop snorted. "Nice! He's tame as an old tabby! I wonder how we won the war. If his discharge papers didn't give him the rating of sharpshooter I'd think he'd been a clerk doing some kind of work at headquarters."

Gosh! A sharpshooter! Ludy hadn't known.

His mother looked up as he came into the room, a tall, fair woman with white streaks in her bright hair. "Ludy Strait! You're a sight! Anyone would think a bank was dusty as a cattle drive. You go right out and wash up, and there's a clean blue shirt on your bed. I've got to see what that hired girl is up to. She'd as soon burn a piece of meat as fry it." She pulled his ear in passing.

"Yes'm. . . . Pop, was Jay really a sharpshooter? How do you know?"

Pop crossed his legs. "I looked over his papers when he answered my ad in the Gazette for a teller. Now hop out and do as your mother said."

Ludy ambled laggardly out to the depressing business of getting clean. Here was a man who had been through almost the whole war, been shot in the leg and been a sharpshooter to boot. Pop thought he was tame—Yallow thought he was mixed up with the wild bunch. Ludy had to laugh. Grownups were certainly funny.

The blue shirt was freshly starched and the collar bothered him all through supper as he sat beside Cynthia at the white-clothed table, placed before the big bay window for coolness. Across from them Jay ate and held grave conversation with pop, but his eyes kept coming past the bowl of flowers in the center to Cynthia.

And Cynthia, with charming decorum, smiled silently at the flowers and ate little. The rosy light of evening colored her cheeks and put a glow in her blue eyes. Her voice held a muted quality, as though she feared to break the silence and miss some far off magic sound. Ludy marveled at this strangely subdued sister and wondered how long she could endure the strain,

Later, when the lamps glowed and the men took their cigars out onto the porch, Ludy let out his belt two notches and went back to the fenced pasture behind the stable. At his whistle the paint pony trotted up for his nightly pinch of pop's pipe tobacco. Ludy pulled his ears and let the horse nuzzle him.

Fireflies burned and flickered in the dusk when he walked down to the road that went straight out of town, crossed the creek's bridge and lifted in a series of switchbacks up the flank of Deception Ridge. By the gate were two lights that held steady and did not wink out. He went over to them and Clance Yallow drew hard on his cigar and turned to look at him in the gloom.

"I know you sent him to Broken Run," Yallow said, turning back, "but did you pick the day or did he?"

"I let him suit it to his work," pop said. "What are you driving at, Clance?"

Yallow's knuckles solidly rapped the gatepost. "Just this: The day Lodge picked to go, the Broken Run stage was held up!"

Pop's cigar made a fiery arc. Then he gave a deep chuckle. "Go on."

"It looks queer." Yallow's voice was dogged. "Two weeks after he came there was a stage holdup; last week they got the Broken Run stage—and he was over there when it happened. . . . How does this bunch know when a stage is carryin' valuables?"

"Because," pop's voice was still amused, "the express company sends along a guard. It's like putting up a sign. Anyway, how could Jay get word to them?"

Yallow's cigar drew to flaming brightness. "He rides out 'most every night, alone. How do you know who he meets? How—"

Up at the house a lamp bloomed in the front room. Its yellow light flooding out upon the porch struck Jay's dark face and Cynthia's bright curls.

Yallow stopped dead. Sparks fell. The cigar shattered in his hard fingers as he stared up at the porch. Ludy felt startled, as though he had suddenly come upon a rattler. This hard-faced man and his sister —he had never thought of that.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Clance," pop said. "We got in a heavy shipment today. Jay knew it was coming and nothin' happened."

"All right." Yallow breathed heavily in the darkness. "But I'm speakin' to Sheriff Dunn about this." He paced off into the night, his slow, deliberate steps sounding on the planks. And each one struck solidly in Ludy's stomach.

Pop snapped his cigar butt into the road. "Not a word of this, son." There was no humor in his voice now. He walked up to the house and Ludy followed feeling a flaming hatred for Clance Yallow. It was almost as bad as if he had accused pop of being crooked.

Sometime during the small hours of the night, while he slept in his narrow bed, Yallow strode down a shaft of moonlight chanting: "He rides at night, he rides at night," and without fully awakening Ludy shoved his head under the pillow to escape.

IT WAS hotter than ever in the bank next morning. Ludy pulled his sticky shirt away from his chest and envied Cynthia in a thin pale green dress. Her unruly hair had been braided and bound about her head and she sat before an opened ledger, very neat and businesslike, ten feet behind Jay's cage. Ludy observed her closely but if pop had told her of his talk with Yallow last night she gave no sign.

After the first rush of business things slacked off. Pop came over to consult Jap about some papers and was standing beside him at the wicket when two men came in. They were dressed in range clothing and the dust and the stains of travel were upon them. Gosh, it must be hot riding on a day like this. Ludy shoved back a wad of damp hair—and his hand froze to his head. He stared at the guns in the men's hands and heard as from a long way off, "Don't move and you won't get hurt!"

Jason Lodge lifted his hands and, as pop made a grab for the money drawer, jarred him off with sudden thrust of shoulder. Luden Strait, a terrible strain in his face, slowly raised his hands shoulder high.

"I'm glad you see it our way, pardner," one of the men said to Jay.

Ludy slowly congealed into a block of ice as the other men whipped a canvas sack from under his arm and ran back to the open safe. This must be part of the bunch that had been holding up the stages, the ones who had killed the guard over beyond Broken Run. Pop had been crazy to grab for the gun in Jay's drawer. If he'd got it he'd have been killed—and Cyn was sitting right in back of him!

The man with the sack came to Jay's till and cleaned it. He grinned at Jay as

he took the gun from the drawer, he shoved it in his waistband, ran out through the gate in the railing and the two men backed through the door.

Out on the street there was a sudden yell and guns began their ugly blasting. Cynthia gave a small scream and her pen made a blot on the page.

Pop lunged for the door and Ludy breathlessly followed. Outside three riders were pounding up the dusty street and one man stood in the middle of the road deliberately emptying his sixgun after them. Near him, one of Sheriff Dunn's deputies stood with a a hand clamped on his shoulder while blood ran down his arm.

The citizens of Elk City were picking themselves up from the walks and emerging from doorways and alleys while those nearest surged up to the bank. Noise beat upon Ludy's ears in waves. Two dogs, frantic with excitement, started a fight, and a boy came running along the plank walk shouting, "Holdup! Holdup!" at the top of his thin voice.

Sheriff Dunn shouldered through the growing crowd and came up beside pop. "They get much, Lude?"

"All our cash." Pop's face was gray. "It's more than the bank can stand."

Dunn faced about and held up his hands. "I'm organizing a posse. Every man that can ride and handle a gun get over to my office." He dropped a hand on pop's shoulder. "We'll do our best, Lude." He went down the steps and the crowd trailed him across to his office.

Ludy solemnly followed pop inside, with something fluttering in his chest. It had sounded as though the bank would fail. Pop would hold himself responsible. It would kill him. The bank was his life. He would—

He was shoved roughly aside and Clance Yallow strode up to pop. "You said I was barkin' up the wrong tree; now it looks like it was the right one." The marshal had been hurrying.

Pop shot a startled glance at Jay, bent over Cynthia. He tugged his moustache. . . . Why, he was half convinced! Ludy gulped on a sudden cold lump in his throat.

Jay now straightened up and came over to them. "Where are they headed?"

"They'll go 'round the ridge," Luden Strait said, "Cut back through the valley and scatter into the hills." A nerve worked in his face.

"Maybe we can stop them." Jay slung off his sleeve protectors and started for the door.

But Yallow planted a hand on his chest. "You're goin' nowhere," he said flatly.

Jay's dark brows bunched. "You think I'm mixed up in this?"

Yallow stood solidly before him. "You're stayin' 'till I find out!"

"You're a fool." Jay said sharply. His face tightened and he half turned away. Then Ludy bit a breath in two as Jay swung. His fist hit Yallow's jaw with the crack of a bullwhip. It drove the marshal five feet back against the wall, and Jay jumped to the door and was gone.

Yallow wheeled from the wall shaking his head, his hand dropping to gun butt. There was leaping fury in his amber eyes. He dove for the door, his shoulder drove it open, there was the crash of shattering glass and then the hard pound of his running feet on the walk.

Ludy was shocked into stillness, but Cynthia jumped up from her desk. "I'm glad Jay hit him," she wildly cried. "I'm glad!"

Pop wheeled to face her. "Jay's a fool!" he said sharply. "He shouldn't have run! Clance will hunt him down and shoot on sight!"

Cold ran down Ludy's body into his legs. His mind spun loosely about these crowding events, but one thought stood out clearly; Jay would be killed. Broken glass crunched under his feet as he blundered through the doorway and out into harsh sunlight.

The posse was formed, some twenty armed men sitting their horses before the sheriff's office. And now Sheriff Dunn came out and swung up into the saddle and the cavalcade moved off down the street in a cloud of dust.

But Clance Yallow was not with them. Cynthia came out, paused briefly beside Ludy and then went down the street towards the Strait's home, her face white and set.

"Wh—where's Clance?" Ludy asked and a man on the walk said, "Down to the liv'ry after his hoss."

Ludy lunged for the tie-rail and with cold stiff fingers loosed the reins of pop's bay. He must find Jay before the marshal did. He must warn him that Yallow would shoot on sight. Jay had likely gone home for his horse so he could join the posse. That was the place to try. He swung up into the saddle. Yallow might also think of that. Ludy slapped the bay with rein ends and went down Main Street at a run.

But there was no sign of Jay at Santee's. Ludy left the bay ground-hitched and ran inside. The door to Jay's room stood open and he pulled up short inside. The room was empty. Then his heart came up between his teeth; the army blanket was slung on the bed and the gun was missing. Jay had come and gone.

He whirled from the room, and there was a sudden pound of hoofs in the driveway. He ran back along the hall and reached the porch to see Jay cut into the road on his long-legged sorrel. But he was going the wrong way to join the posse. He was going away from Main Street toward Deception Ridge.

Ludy yelled and ran. He got to his horse, and then he understood; Clance Yallow was coming up the street astride the heavy black he used to patrol town on—and he was coming at a run.

Ludy flung himself onto the bay and kicked him into a jackrabbit start. Jay would turn at the next block and cut back to join the posse. He would be safe with them. Yallow would see that he only wanted to help.

But Jay did not turn at the corner. He kept straight on for Deception Ridge and a frantic despair came to Ludy. Jay hadn't listened when he told him there was no way down the other side of the ridge. He must think it was a shortcut that he could use to head off the bandits. He'd be killed if he tried to climb down! And if he didn't try he'd be trapped by Clance Yallow! This was the only road up Deception! "Jay! Jay!" His throat ached with the effort.

Hot wind filled his shirt and blurred his sight. Up ahead on the left was his home and something green stirred beyond the poplars bordering the walk. Cynthia stared as he shot past. Looking back he saw her throw a startled glance at Yallow pounding up the road, turn and run for the house, her dress held high with both hands.

The long driving muscles of pop's bay were steadily increasing his lead on Yallow's black, which was a weight carrier without much speed, but up ahead the long-legged sorrel was pulling away. Houses of town gradually petered out and then the switchbacks lay gray before him like loops of a rope carelessly flung against the flank of the ridge.

Jay disappeared around the first bend and presently the bay slowed for the long pull. Then there were three horses strung out on the loops of this road, each unable to gain on the one ahead. And the sun was a red-hot sponge that sopped moisture from horses and men.

LIKE a snake, the road writhed out upon the rough summit of the ridge, twisting sinuously around outcroppings of rock and blackened tree stumps and dipping into hollows. Ludy instinctively ducked as a rifle cracked. But there was no sound of a bullet and he sat up and yelled. Getting no answer he shoved the bay along, watching keenly ahead for sight of Jay. Some-

where far back on the switchbacks was Yallow on the plodding black.

Up ahead a horse whinnied. Ludy rounded a bend and saw the sorrel tied in a circular clearing. He slid from the saddle and ran crashing through underbrush that slashed at him while fear made a bitterness in his mouth. Jay must be somewhere along the cliff trying to find a way down.

He burst through the last of the brush and came out upon the rim-rock, and his stomach made its familiar contraction at the awful emptiness. The opposite ridge was densely green but between it and Ludy lay a river of space. His palms grew damply cold and his spine tingled.

He braced himself against the pull of space and gazed into the fearful depths. Far below two horses raced along the valley floor. And—yes, one of them carried a double load. His eyes ranged the back trail. There, lying half concealed in a clump of brush, was the third horse. That shot he had heard must have killed it. But the shot had come from up on this ridge. He felt confused. No one could shoot that distance. Far back at the valley's mouth a roll of dust billowed like a cape behind men and horses of the posse—but they were beyond all shooting range.

He jumped as a rifle cracked again, closer now. In front of him the horse with the single rider went down, throwing the rider clear.

Ludy jerked his head around. Fifty feet to his right, on an overhang of rock, was Jay. He was stretched flat and the wicked looking rifle was clamped to his shoulder. As Ludy watched he sat up, tore the end from a small envelope and sifted powder into the gun's muzzle. He slid in the bullet and seated it with the ramrod, working with the sure swiftness of long practice. Ludy stared. He rubbed his eyes and stared. This was magic. It had happened right before him—but he didn't believe it. Then he remembered how Mrs. Murphy had jumped to the end of the tube and how clearly the flank of Deception had come into focus. Maybe—

Brush slapped behind him and he whirled. Clance Yallow had approached almost silently and was watching Jay, grim speculation on his dust streaked face. He came up beside Ludy as Jay again bellied down on the rock. And Ludy, with jubilation, pointed down into the valley It told its own story—Clance Yallow could no longer doubt Jay.

Then he forgot about Yallow as the horse below turned and headed directly across the narrow valley. The bandits were driving for the opposite ridge. They could not outrun the posse and would now try that steep wooded slope on foot.

He looked over at Jay and his stomach tightened as the rifle shoved out and steadied. The heated air pressed in on him, stifling his breathing. The bandits were drawing further off with each stride of the horse.

Sound slammed against his ears. The rifle jumped. For an instant nothing happened down on the plain and, knowing what their escape would mean to pop, a sickness came to him. Then the horse gave a great convulsive leap and went completely over. One rider struck and rolled out but the other lay motionless, pinned down by the horse. After that nothing happened down in the bright valley where heat simmered.

He walked back to the clearing beside Jay on feet that took no notice of the ground. "Gosh, Jay, that was some shootin'!" He reached out and put reverent fingers on the gun's gleaming barrel.

Jay grinned. "My business for three years. When you get those crosshairs on something it's hard to miss." His black hair stood straight up. His eyes had a wild, hot brilliance. Ludy blinked. This was not the calm, orderly Jason Lodge he knew. There was something electric and untamed about him. Ludy had never seen this man before.

They reached the clearing and Yallow,

who had been walking ahead, wheeled about. His big solid fists were knotted. "All right," he said, "you can handle a gun. . . . Now let's see how you handle your fists."

"G—gosh, Clance, are you crazy?" Ludy's voice was a thin bleat.

"You've got no fight with me, Yallow," Jay said and slowly scrubbed his chest. But the hot light in his eyes flickered like lightning below the horizon.

"We'll not waste time!" All his passion and his anger were in Yallow's deep voice. "No man can slug me and go untouched. An' if it wasn't that it would be something else—get your shirt off!"

Jay studied him for the space of three heartbeats. "Maybe you're right, Yallow. This is as good a time as any. . . . Take care of this, button." He handed Ludy the gun.

YALLOW, a sudden fierce joy in his face, slung his gunbelt aside. With one sweep he ripped off his shirt and squared away, a solidly built fighting man, the huge muscles rippling and knotting under the white skin.

Jay shed his shirt, and Ludy's mouth went dry and fear crawled in his stomach. Those long smooth muscles were no match for Yallow's bunched power. Jay would be beaten into a broken and bloody thing like other men Yallow had fought. And now Yallow drove forward, his right hand swinging out in a great rounding blow, and this fight became a blur to Ludy's straining eyes, such was the speed and power of their striking. The wildness and savagery gripped him while sweat dripped from his face and he breathed shallowly from the top of his lungs. The clearing on top of Deception Ridge was filled with the scrape and lunge of feet, the heavy smacking of blows and the deep rush of their breathing.

He jumped when Cynthia reined in beside him and sat, blue eyes wide in her white face, hand locked on the saddle horn. At sight of her Yallow sucked air deep into his great chest and charged at Jay like a bull.

And now a pattern began to take shape in this fight—Clance Yallow driving forward, getting all the power of his heavy legs behind each blow, and Jay circling, going backwards and circling, like some great lithe cat, the red welts showing plain on body and arms, while his fists lashed in over and under Yallow's guard. He sidestepped and rocked Yallow with a blow to the side of the head.

But the marshal had learned his fighting in the saloons and on the sidewalks of trail-towns. He knocked his way in, got his arms around the taller man's body, butted him on the mouth and slung him off his feet.

Jay hit and rolled. He got to his feet and he stabbed twice to the face to keep the marshal off. And, as Yallow raised his guard, he plowed his fist into the belly, with all the driving turn of his shoulder behind it. Color drained from Yallow's face and a sick look came into his eyes.

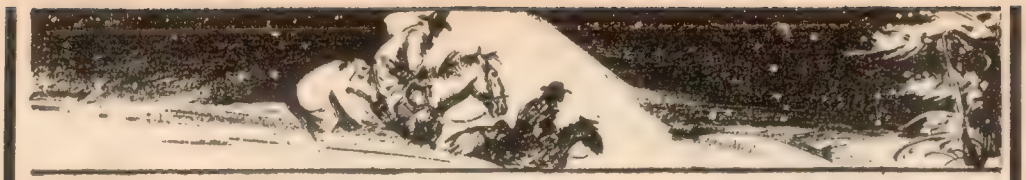
And now Jay began to press, hammering Yallow on face and body, the long muscles in arms and back seemingly made of tireless rubber. And Yallow, his breathing an agony that showed in his bloody face, fought with sluggish arms. He swung and missed.

(Continued on page 111)

RUSTLER'S ERROR

A Utah police officer reported that he wouldn't rest until he caught the rustlers of six sheep from a nearby pasture the other day. They were his sheep.

Helfer



IN THE SADDLE

IT'S A well-known fact, amigos, that for a man who aimed to die fast, there was no better place than the old West. Many were the rough customers who came roaring and snorting out of the East . . . and ended up being carried quietly to rest in some frontier boothill.

But did you ever stop to consider that the West wrote a sudden end to the careers—not only of some tough hombres—but also to those of two apparently unkillable critters? That's right; the buffalo was one—in the '60's he covered the plains like sawdust on a saloon floor, and by the 80's he'd practically disappeared.

Now Allan K. Echols has come along to spin the strange and lugubrious tale of the other animal the West destroyed—and the one that built the West, at that—Mr. Longhorn, himself!

Anyhow, compadres, here's the true story of the steer whose horns were so long and so dangerous—that they killed him. . . .

In the early days of the railroad, when range wasn't fenced, many a beef cow took up a stand on a railroad track and fought a losing duel with a freight train. It used to be said that the most valuable crossbreed of beef cow a man could own was to have a ten-dollar scrub cow crossed by a Texas Pacific railroad engine. The carcass that was left became a very high-priced blue-blooded breeding animal by the time the railroad's claim agent came around to settle the damages.

While railroad engines might have killed a good many scrub cattle, it was not the engine, but the lowly cattle car behind it that killed off the longhorn. In those days freight cars had a door space of about four and one-half feet, through which had to be driven Longhorn cattle who would be angrily waving a pair of horns five or six feet wide.

There are stories of longhorns who had to be loaded by having a couple of cowboys standing at the car door and twisting the animal's head so that one horn would go upward and the other downward while he passed into the car. There are other stories of men who stood by the door with a hand saw, and when a cow's horns were too wide for him to enter the car, the man sawed them off and sent him on in. Other ranchers simply corraled their shipping herds and sawed all horns off on general principles before they started loading them into cars.

Another difficulty encountered with longhorns in boxcars was the problem of wounding. Frightened steers who perhaps had never seen a railroad found themselves jammed like subway passengers into a hot and noisy boxcar, minus water and feed for days at a time. Angry and restless they fought with their horns, wounding each other, sometimes killing each other. Wounded animals died from loss of blood, or became infected with flies on the open wounds.

Again, sometimes a steer in a car would get one of his horns caught in the open slats with which cattle cars are sided, and

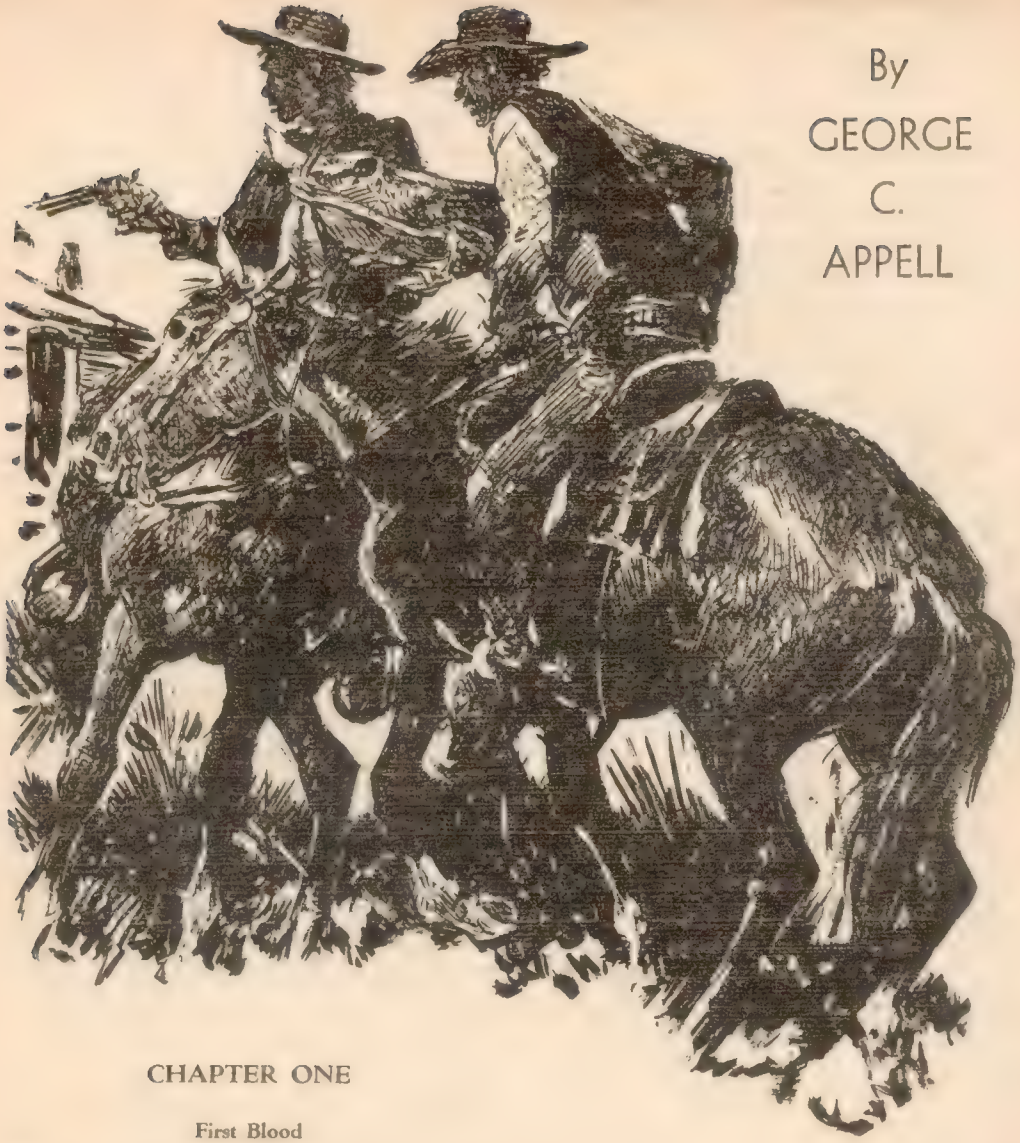
(Continued on page 112)

"Sit still, both of you! You go first, Huntoon."

RIDE CLEAR OF ALDERVILLE!

What better marshal could Alderville have than Ben Huntoon, who'd learned all the tricks and twists of the outlaw trail the hard way—by riding it himself!

By GEORGE C. APPELL



CHAPTER ONE

First Blood

BEN HUNTOON was sitting trailside in his stockinged feet when Pollifaxen found him. He was dangling his broken boots in one hand while with the other he swatted at impertinent flies. Pollifaxen reined up and stared down with something like amusement on his saturnine features. He had seen this before—the young drifter who had reached the end of the trail, who had followed the golden horizons and come up instead against the rocks and the thorns. And this one was young, though his eyes had age in them and the bitter glints that reflect hard experience.

Pollifaxen asked, "What happened, kid?"

"Lots of things." Ben saw a man up in that saddle who made him feel insecure, for the man was danger itself. You can tell, you come to know, you get to feel those things. The man's legs were very long; his hat was pushed back on his thick gray hair. And as he smiled, his eye-lids moved close together until the light came out of them in bright streaks.

"No horse?"

"No horse. He pulled his peg two nights ago."

Pollifaxen nodded sympathetically. "An' no money."

"An' no work." That wrapped it up. Ben automatically reached for the makings, because tobacco goes with talk. But he withdrew his hand from his pocket empty. He hadn't smoked since he last had eaten, which was two days back.

Pollifaxen tossed the makings down to him. "What's your name?"

"Huntoon." He flipped a cigarette into shape. "They call me Ben." He glanced up through gray ribbons of smoke. "You got a spread?" He pitched the makings back, and stood up.

"Sort of." Pollifaxen was appraising him, as he appraised all men. He spoke his own name, added that he was known as Polly for short, and told Huntoon to climb up behind the cantle. "I'll tote you to my layout, an' you can pick a horse for yourself."

"That's right nice of you, mister—"

"Polly."

"—Polly. Don't know when I can pay for it."

"Don't worry about it." They rode on at a walk, smoking and talking, chipping bits of conversation back and forth as men will pitch pennies in order to idle away the hours. Ben's feet hung almost as low as did Pollifaxen's, althought Ben's shoulders were not as thick nor was he as supple. Pollifaxen gave the effect of sitting easy and well-oiled, like a cat; whereas Ben was still a bit on the gawky side. It was a question of experience more than of age. You accumulate years whether you want to or not, but experience—like moustaches or religion—is your own business.

They passed the shadow of Sable Peak and rode through pine scrub that was studded with rocks. Then entered higher country, following a rimrock trail that brought them to upper slopes that were creased with draws and wrinkled here and there with vales.

Pollifaxen's layout was a cave in the hills that had been extended by adding a lean-to in front. Smoke lipped from the lean-to and trailed away on the wind. A man was cooking stew. Three other men were lying on their elbows playing cards. And then Ben saw a fifth man high on the rocks, silhouetted against the sparkling flint. A lookout—who undoubtedly had tracked them into camp through his rifle sights.

"Ben," Pollifaxen said. He pointed to the others as he spoke. "Pecos, Gimp, Yount. That's Joe cooking. An' up in the rocks is Ten-High."

Yount came forward. He was a bow-shouldered man with a three-day beard and glittering eyes. He smelled sour to Ben. He asked, "Where'd yuh git him, Polly?"

"Back aways, when I was lookin' at the Silver Zero. He's on the bum." Pollifaxen pushed his hat forward, almost over his eyes. "Come on, Ben. Chuck's hot, take some. Then you can fork that claybank down there an' get to know him."

Ben got the pitch. It struck into him like a cold knife. But there was nothing he could do about it if he wanted to eat and to ride. He ate: he caught up the claybank and named it Red: he came back to where Pollifaxen and Yount were standing.

POLLIFAXEN winked at him and handed him a twenty-dollar gold piece.

"I'm gamblin' that much that you won't skeedaddle. I've been hungry, too. Now listen. . . ."

Nothing in Ben Huntoon's twenty-two years had prepared him for what he was listening to. The words rolled over him in persistent shock waves. And then they ended, and he was nodding in dumb acceptance. It wouldn't be too awful: after all, he was only going to look at a place, he wouldn't steal anything or shoot anyone.

Yount rode with him. There was no talk and no tobacco. Yount led him through the

afternoon and finally drew up in an alder thicket and pointed to the flatlands below. There was a small ranch down there, slumbrous in the mellow sunlight. It was shaded by cottonwoods. Yount whispered—though there was no need for him to whisper—"Go git it. An' don't forgit that I'll have a rifle on you all the time. In other words—don't forgit to come back."

The explanation wasn't necessary. Ben trailed down onto the flatlands and poked south toward the Silver Zero. There was a name stenciled on a cerealbox atop the gatepost: *Marsh*. The cerealbox was for mail, which meant that a town must be fairly close by.

A girl came out onto the verandah and shaded her eyes toward him. She was young and slim and she had taffy-colored hair that was bound in a red band. Her cotton shirtwaist was white and her skirt was tan.

Ben touched his hatbrim. "Afternoon, miss."

"Hello." She leaned a shoulder against a verandah post. "Need something?"

"Water for my horse, if I may." He swung down and led Red to a trough. Over his shoulder he said, "Kind of lonely for you here, isn't it?"

"Not awfully. Dad's in town, but the bunkhouse is lively. There's been a stud game going on in there for four years, including Sundays."

"Don't play cards, myself. How's the stock?"

"Fattening. Most of it's on the west bench." Her eyes narrowed slightly and she added, "Well-guarded, too."

He remounted. "Is that necessary?"

"Sometimes it is." She was frowning at him now, brows drawn in puzzlement.

He touched his hat again and circled out through the gates and trotted west, then cut north into the hills and met Yount in the twilight. Yount peered closely at him. "Easy?"

"Don't know. I've never done this before."

"Look, kid, when I ask a question you'd better—"

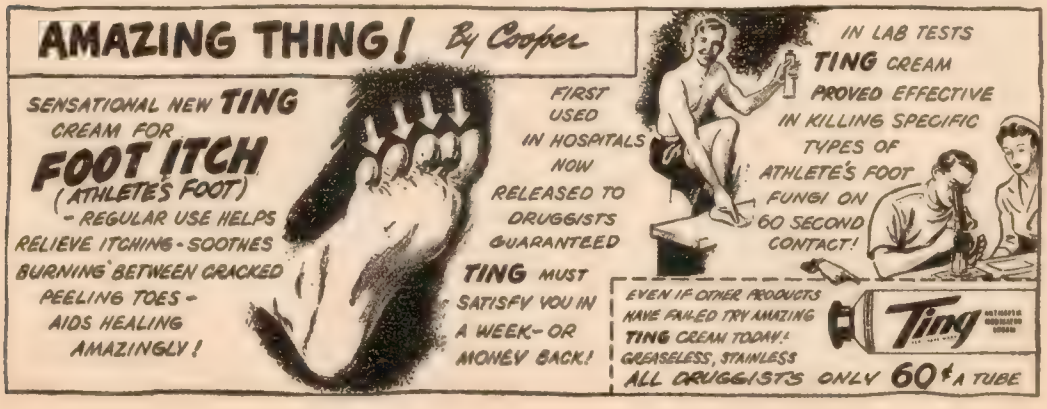
Ben was riding beside him. He said, "A girl told me the stock's on the west bench, well-guarded. But she also said the bunkhouse is full of hands playin' stud. You add it up."

It was late when they got back to the cave in the hills. Ben made his report to Pollifaxen. He added, "Polly, there's a nice girl there. I wouldn't want to see her get hurt."

Pollifaxen laughed. He was cleaning his .44 in the sallow light of a pit fire. "Nobody'll get hurt if they don't get in the way. Besides, we hit the bench range, not the house."

Ben was perspiring, despite the night's coolness. For the second time in his life he said, "I need a drink."

"Look under the wreck pan." Pollifaxen finished cleaning his gun. "Yeah—I reckon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that girl's bluffin' about the bench bein' armored. I would've asked her myself, 'cept I can't be seen." He laughed again.

Ben Huntoon spread his blanket and lay with an arm across his eyes, wanting to dissociate himself from the whole thing. He knew now why Pollifaxen had picked him up. It was because he was a clean-looking youngster who would not readily be connected with a gang of rustlers. He was a good advance man who could line a place up and report. He would never be identified with the gang, because he would never make a raid; no defending herders would ever see him.

He thought, *It's time I got out of this. . . .*

He heard Pollifaxen and three others ride off into the darkness. He heard Yount and Joe murmuring over the dying cook fire. From time to time the murmurs stopped, and he knew that Yount was looking at him to make sure that he was still there, and not trying to sneak away.

He felt trapped, despite a certain allegiance to Pollifaxen. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before. He'd been born, orphaned and left to drift—all in the space of twelve years. He'd hired out to grangers, peeled broncs, ridden fence. But there had never been anything like this. It made him feel sick. He rolled over and drew his blanket around his shoulders—and heard Yount's rowels tinkle.

Dawn was paling the skies when he awoke and sat upright. Pollifaxen was dismounting, was handing his foam-rilled horse to Joe. Was laughing.

"Simple," he was telling Yount. "We had to knock down two night herders, but the rest was easy." Matchlight burst whitely across his cheeks as he lit a cigarette. "Pecos, Gimp, an' Ten-High are shovin' the drive south. They'll be across The Line by daylight. We're safe enough up here, they'll think we're skeedaddlin' along with the herd . . . Where's Ben?"

"Yonder on his blanket."

Pollifaxen knelt, reached out, and knuckled Ben's jaws in a rough, friendly gesture. "You did okay, kid. Stick with me."

"It worked out all right, huh?" Ben's stomach was an empty void, a bottomless vacuum. His tongue tasted bad.

"Most a hundred head. All fat for the Chihuahua markets."

Ben nodded heavily, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "That's fine," he said. "That's just fine."

AFTER breakfast, Pollifaxen told him to come for a ride. "We're goin' to Alderville for a looky-see. What I mean is, they'll never expect a bank job. All their attention'll be on the outer ranges, after a rustle. It's worked before, an' it'll work again."

Yount eyed them suspiciously over his coffee can. "Leave some of that foldin' money for me."

"There's enough for everyone." Pollifaxen was in a talkative mood as they rode, responding to a reaction that some men get after a play with guns. "You be my kid, hear? I've never had one, never expected to have one. So you be my kid, an' you'll learn things."

Sunlight streamed across the desert's tawny dust and silver cacti; in the distance a haze lay over Mexico. Pollifaxen talked on: "Here's one thing—when a man's after you, stay behind him an' he'll never find you. That goes for towns an' open ranges both. Make him believe he's followin' you, then tag him in the back whenever you want to."

They rode down the long horse miles toward Alderville, and still did Pollifaxen talk. It was as if a great cork had been pulled from the reservoir of his memory, releasing torrents of words. "When you're about to throw down on a man, move his eye first. Look over his shoulder like you'd just seen somebody start for him. Make him take his eyes off you—for one second. Then you've got him . . . Marshals, as a rule, are not much good, because they're

town products. But sheriffs, in this country, are a different lot. A man's got to be damned good to be a sheriff, because so many people are dependin' on him that he can't be anythin' but first-rate. Here we don't have to worry, because there are no county lines yet. But when we're workin' in a county, we got to be sure how good the sheriff is."

"Listen, Polly—' Ben wanted to break it off.

"You lissen, an' I'll talk. You got to learn, kid . . . Never bust into a bank at dawn, that's when they're most expectin' it. Make your play around midnight, when the night marshal's drowsy an' the town's all in bed. That way, it'll take 'em longer to get up an' form a posse. Hell, I remember two years ago in Twin Oaks, when we got a thirty-minute head start an' circled back an' come into town for breakfast."

Pollifaxen laughed—a deep peal of mirth.

"The posse'd returned by that time, an' we ate with 'em while they told us how they'd lost our trail." He laughed again. "An' all that time, we had the bank money in our boots. We said we were lookin' for work—which had been true—an' then we paid up an' rode on. That's what I mean by town products."

Pollifaxen's talk petered out as they neared Alderville. They raised it at noon. It was larger than most cowtowns because it had already been designated as the seat of government for the county when the county would be legislated. Men with a sense of real estate values were commencing operations.

Pollifaxen pulled off the trail and waved to Ben. "I'll meet you in that arroyo yonder."

Ben rode on, wondering if Pollifaxen had a gun on him. He imagined that he had, or that Yount had slipped down ahead of him to intercept any break he might make in that direction. Ben knew too much to be permitted his freedom in this area.

He racked his claybank in front of the bank and went in. It was one room bisected by a wooden counter that had a teller's grille rising from the center. There was a door in the wall behind the counter, and there was a bench in front of it. Sitting on the bench was the girl from Marsh's ranch. Ben stared at her, unable to speak, his throat unaccountably dry. She nodded stiffly. He touched his hatbrim to her and went to the teller's grille. In a loud voice he asked about a loan on some land that he wanted to buy. He said that he had enough money for the land, but not enough to build on it.

THE teller wasn't surprised. Many people coming into Alderville desiring loans in order to build houses and beat the expected boom and then sell out later at a profit. The teller referred him to the door behind the counter.

When Ben walked around the counter and approached it, he saw a lean, sun-darkened man slouching in a chair with a Spencer on his lap. This man had not been visible from the front part of the room.

The door opened and a white-haired man in black broadcloth stepped out sideways, still talking to whoever was in the back room. "The posse will stay out until it finds something. It won't come back empty-handed. No one's going to rustle a hundred head of mine and get away with it."

"I don't blame you, Mr. Marsh. We're on the alert, too. Double guard, twenty-four hours a day."

Marsh turned and put on his hat. "Make it twenty-five hours a day." He pulled the door shut and marched past Ben Huntoon. "Come on, Ellen."

Ben knocked on the door, took off his hat and went in. The banker, Mr. Goddard, was a bald-headed man with starched linen and a black string tie. He heard Ben's story, advised him to secure the land first and the loan second, and bid him good-day.

Ben strode past the guard, past the coun-

ter, past the teller. The front bench was empty.

In the street, he looked around. The Marshes—father and daughter—were rolling west in a high-wheeled rig, heading for home.

He rode north to the arroyo where Pollifaxen was waiting, and reported in the negative. "There are two guards, day and night. It wouldn't be worth the try."

They rode slowly, Pollifaxen with his chin down in his neckerchief. Then he made up his mind. "All right, we'll leave it for some other time, when the town's more relaxed. We got that herd money comin' to us anyway."

It was dusk when they reached the cave. Pollifaxen called out, but their was no answer. The place was dark, the fires were dead ash. Pollifaxen drew his .44 and circled the lean-to- warily. A creaking noise drew his ear, and he rode toward it. It was a rope hanging from a tree limb, and the man Joe was swinging dead in its noose. The wind played with his body, pushing it idly to and fro. The rope creaked on.

Full darkness thickened over the land, and the stars appeared.

"Let's ride, Ben. The posse just missed us." Pollifaxen holstered. "Yount must've got away."

Ben Huntoon's thinking crowded toward the decision that he must make. He must leave Pollifaxen before it was too late. The posse was obviously not asking questions or holding trials. Ben decided to stay with Pollifaxen through the hours of darkness and see him safely to The Line. After that, he would quit.

They rode slowly still, so as not to arouse the suspicions of listening ears. Only guilty men gallop for The Line. They rode the night down to dawn and stopped just north of the Rio. Some yucca shrubs that fringed a shoulder of rock ahead were trembling in the light breeze.

Pollifaxen and Ben rolled cigarettes and smoked in silence for a minute. Then Pollifaxen said, "I know. You want to pull foot."

"That's right, Polly." Relief washed through Ben Huntoon. "This isn't the life for me."

"I won't keep you from driftin,' if that's what you want. This area's been bled of what it's worth for a while." Pollifaxen shrugged. "I think I might poke toward Oklahoma, or layover in Mexico an' burn some of that money that's comin.' We're supposed to meet Pecos an' Gimp an' Ten-High in Chihuahua next week."

"You are."

Pollifaxen nodded. "I am—now." He snapped his cigarette to the ground.

Ben fumbled in his pocket and brought out the twenty-dollar gold piece. "Here's the ante. I don't need it."

Pollifaxen looked hurt. "Hell yuh don't! Call it wages."

"Take it back, Polly."

The yucca shrubs rusted apart and Ben saw the glint of a leveled rifle barrel. "Sit still, both of you."

Above the rifle barrel was a hatbrim pulled so far down that nothing was visible except a pair of glittering eyes. Yount's voice continued, "You put the posse onto camp, huh? Then you leaned against the bank, an' now you're runnin' for it with the heavy money. Well, three can play at that game. Lucky for me I heard Joe's shot." The rifle barrel edged toward Ben. "You go first, Huntoon."

Pollifaxen kneed his horse against the claybank and bumped it aside as the rifle cracked. The bullet slocked into Pollifaxen's arm.

Ben snagged out his .31-30 and fired twice and spun Yount's hat off. Then he and Yount fired together. The rifle slug tore through Ben's shirt and his .31-30 bullet rapped against the rifle's breech and sang off in whining ricochet. But Yount didn't fire again, and Ben saw why: the breech was jammed by the strike of his bullet.

Pollifaxen had his .44 out now, and Yount whirled and pitched the rifle away and sprinted for his horse. Ben tagged him through the spine and knocked him sprawling. His legs thrashed once, and he was dead.

Pollifaxen was tearing his neckerchief into strips with his teeth. "That's the way, kid. That's how I told you to do it." He winced, and spat angrily. "Yount won't ambush anybody again. Thanks for taking him."

"Thanks for taking my bullet for me."

They buried Yount, and Pollifaxen took the man's horse. "Ben, you still want to quit on me?"

"I got to, Polly."

"There's blood on you now."

Ben nodded. "That's when it's time to quit." He reached out a hand that was quivering from shock. "So long, Polly."

"So long, kid."

Full daylight was yellow on the land, and Pollifaxen rode into it until he was a tiny black figure leading a tiny horse. He never looked back. Then Ben Huntoon swung his bits east and followed the sun's path. He felt a good deal better than he had in a long time.

CHAPTER TWO

The New Marshal

THAT month was a long one for Ben Huntoon.

He made fourteen dollars running a string of half-broken cayuses to El Paso. He got drunk there, and woke up broke. He got drunk because his conscience dragged him back to his little-boyhood again, with a little boy's unreasoning fears and insecurities. He had traveled with outlaws, had worked with them; had murdered a man for one of them. He didn't know it, but he had become a man himself.

Broke and red-eyed, not even considering the gold piece as being expendable, he poked north again and repaired fence and earned ten dollars. A week in the saddle shook the liquor out of him and eased his conscience. And then it was four weeks that had passed and here he was riding into Alderville—as he had known all the time he would.

He asked the way to Marsh's. In the street, he was taking Red off the restaurant rail when the Marshes spun into town in their high-wheeled rig. This time, Marsh didn't pass in hard-eyed anger; he braked and climbed down and studied Ben Huntoon's wind-burned face.

"Where have I seen you before?"

Ben told him, "In the bank, about a month back."

Marsh nodded, remembering. "Just after the rustle."

"You accusing me, mister?"

Ellen Marsh got out of the rig and joined her father. "I'm sure he wasn't in on it, dad."

Ben grinned at her. "I've never stolen a thing in my life."

She glanced quickly at him—an upslant of green-eyed knowing. She didn't believe all of what he had said, but she wasn't going to admit it. Her strange expression told him as much.

Marsh nodded, then. "One of the gang, a man named Yount, put the posse onto a cave in the hills. They didn't know at the time that Yount was in on the deal, but they found out later, from someone named Joe. This Joe went for his gun, and they hanged him, as they damned well should have."

"Yount?" Ben spoke the name with remembrance in his voice.

Marsh's eyes sharpened. "Know him?"

"No."

Marsh lit a cigar. "The posse followed the herd all the way into Mexico, almost to Chihuahua. They scattered the gang, killed one, and recovered most of my stock." He cleared his throat. "But the leader got away. He must have stayed behind them."

"How do you know?"

Suspicion hardened in Marsh's eyes.

"What's your name?"

"Huntoon. Ben Huntoon. I'm a drifter."

"Well then, you'd better drift." Marsh hooked a thumb outward.

The shuffle of ponies became audible as two men rode in off the desert, scuffling dust. They tied up in front of the restaurant and went in. Marsh looked at Ben, at the ponies, at Ben again. "Friends of yours?" His voice was thin, tensile, accusative.

An immensely fat man waddled from the bank and turned down the plankwalk. He lurched along like a sore-footed bear. Marsh waved to him, and he waved back.

"Friend of yours?" Ben asked.

"Foulkerson, the town marshal. He's old and he's sick, but he can still draw a gun. I hope he keeps an eye on the restaurant."

Foulkerson went into his office cubby and closed the door.

Marsh said, "You'd better drift."

Ben threw a leg off his saddle and stepped up to the man. "I'll tell you something. I'm not a rustler, and I'm not a bank robber. I'm not wanted. I go where I please, and I stay where I please. That clear?" He saw a fresh light in Ellen's eyes, a new sparkle. She was beginning to approve of him.

Marsh drew smokily on his cigar. Then he faced around and took Ellen by the elbow and escorted her to the rig. He climbed in beside her, slashed his whip and rolled up the street.

Ben led his claybank back to the tie-rail. Now he had to stay in town, whether or not he wanted to. He had to face Marsh down all the way.

HE TRAMPED through the gray-and-orange shadows of store lights, and came to the Sam Houston. The saloon wasn't yet crowded, the piano player was still sober, and the swamper had no work to do, Ben asked for barley. He was drinking it slowly, holding himself to this one libation, when the slatted doors flapped open and the two men from the restaurant came in. They were black-hatted, harsh-mouthed, and wore leather jackets. They ordered rye.

Ben watched them in the back mirror. One was tall and thick, the other was tall and thin. The first had sandy hair, the second had black. When the barman demanded his money, they paid it; when he came down to Ben, he paid too. He asked, "Can't a man relax over his drink?"

"No credit to drifters, bub. You pay by the drink here."

The two men were watching him now. They were overtly interested.

Ben asked, "Any chance of not being a drifter? I'm looking for work." He kept an eye on the back mirror.

The barman shrugged. "Town's growin.' You can't tell. Try Marsh—that's the Silver Zero brand. Or Jamieson."

Sandy Hair made a beckoning motion. Ben carried his drink along the bar. Sandy Hair said, "Ridin' through?"

"That's right."

Sandy Hair glanced questioningly at Dark Hair. Dark Hair nodded. Sandy Hair said, "My name's Smith, and my friend here is Jones. We can use a man."

"As what?"

"Let's go for a walk."

They left the Sam Houston and walked slowly, spurs chinking. Smith and Jones carried two guns each. Smith asked, "What d'you call yourself.?"

"Benjamin."

At the end of the plankwalk, they stopped in shadows. "Want five thousand dollars?"

"Who doesn't?" Ben's hackles were cold on his neck, his palms were prickling. The thought was quick in him, *I guess I've got the look of an outlaw on me. A badman—at twenty-two.*

Smith lighted a cigarette and folded his arms. "See that bank over there? Well, it's a paper box. It's not even guarded at night. It used to be—after some rustlin' was done around here. But not now. The town marshal's a tired old man."

"You said something about five thousand dollars."

"Well, just suppose that me an' Jones broke the vault an' scooped up the cash. Just suppose we needed a man to hold the horses, keep lookout, an' sooth anybody who got suspicious. Why, that li'l service'd be worth five thousand dollars." Smith's cigarette brightened and dimmed.

"Tonight?"

"Good a time as any."

Ben hesitated. "You're taking a long shot, dealing with a stranger. Just suppose I turned you in?"

Smith's smile was brief and bitter. "There's a warrant out for you—" he paused as Ben stiffened—"with a li'l price on it. It hasn't got your name but it's got your description. You've been known to consort with Long Tom Pollifaxen, it says . . . Now, do we turn you in? Or do we give you five thousand dollars for watchin' us lift fifty thousand?" Smith grinned bleakly. "The choice, Benjamin, is all yours."

The breath ran out of Ben Huntoon in one lengthy gust. He fumbled a cigarette together and lit it. "All right, I'll buy it."

"You'd better buy it."

Sure, I'd better buy it, and get slugged for my pains and left on the trail without even five dollars.

The night took on a dreamlike quality for him. He was moving on air, walking behind himself watching somebody else go through the motions. It was an eerie levitation that carried him, ultimately, to a drainpipe at the rear of the bank. Inside the building, a clock struck one.

The rest of it happened like a nightmare in which nothing seemed to be connected logically. It became a matter of shapes, but no sounds. It was Smith and Jones going up the drainpipe like two great cats. It was Ben holding three sets of reins in damp hands. It was night wind and cloud scud and remote stars; it was a heart thudding a rib cage to numbness and it was Smith and Jones coming down the drainpipe with canvas sacks at their belts. And it was Smith whispering. "We cut in through the roof an' cheesed the vault with a saw . . .Come on, Benjamin, we'll split later on the trail."

Ben Huntoon's hand blurred to his holster and he had a gun on them. "No, you two come with me. The—"

Smith and Jones drew together and three shots barked almost simultaneously. Smith fired once, Huntoon twice. Smith and Jones swayed against each other like two drunks, and drooped downward. Jones was dead when he hit the ground; Smith lived until Foulkerson came waddling up with a shotgun.

The marshal put a lamp on Ben. "You're wounded, feller. In the shoulder."

Ben's gun slipped from his fingers as pain flared down his arm. He thought he'd vomit. He heard footsteps on the run; other lamps bloomed. A man was trying to shake his hand.

Foulkerson muttered. "This one here's Sandy Matson, an' the other looks like Blackie McCall." He raised an eye to Ben. "I can use your talents, feller."

The next noon, with Goddard and Marsh watching, Ben Huntoon was sworn in as deputy marshal of Alderville. His first official act, when old Foulkerson had trudged to lunch, was to burn the newly-distributed dodger that proclaimed his description and his past association.

That evening, he was a supper guest at the Silver Zero.

IN FEBRUARY, Foulkerson died and they gave him a big funeral. Ben succeeded to the office. Winter went over into spring, and the yuccas blossomed and the desert mellowed.

In April, Ben chased eleven rustlers forty miles after they had cut Jamieson's fence and run off two hundred cows. The new marshal bagged four of the gang and lost the rest in the hills. With Jamieson's riders, he succeeded in recovering one hundred ninety-two head.

That was the month that the county was

legislated into being. It was named Alder, after the seat of government. Main Street was tarred, and a two-story hotel went up. There was talk of running a spur line from the railroad, to supplement the stagecoach that gave Alderville its single pulsebeat from the outer world each week. There was also talk of running Ben Huntoon for first sheriff of the new county, against John Neal from Frontera and Happy Swain from Adobe Wells. The betting was on Ben.

He and Ellen had their first fight, a scrap that had to do with the virtues of the Spanish hitch as opposed to those of the diamond. They didn't see each other for a week after that. It was the week that the stage station at Alta Mesa was held up by a masked rider with long legs and gray hair. The station agent was killed, and the robber got away without the safe, leaving only a confused and wounded change boy to describe him. Ben turned the town over to young Frank Howie, his deputy, and rode out to Alta Mesa. He met John Neal and Happy Swain there, and good-natured banter crackled among them as they all agreed that it was too bad that the election wasn't until next month, and there wasn't a sheriff yet to handle such county jurisdiction matters as these. John Neal said, "Whoever did it crossed The Line, an' that's where I'm headin'."

Happy Swain doubted it. "He took out east, to leave the state by its near border. I'm headin' that way . . . See you boys at the pollin' booth."

Ben let them go. He questioned the convalescing change boy for another hour, asking the same questions again and again: How did the man sound? How did he move? What were his eyes like? Tell me about his horse.

And the answers always jibed.

He rode into the hills and crossed a rimrock trail and came to the remains of a windblown lean-to that had been shielding the mouth of a cave. A bleached skeleton lay under a tree, clothed in mildewed tatters. A rotted rope end was still around its neck.

"Hello, kid."

Ben was expecting that. "Hello, Polly."

Pollifaxen came out of the cave and rested his rifle against the tree. "Poor Joe, huh?"

"Yeah, poor Joe. Why don't you bury him?"

"Just got here." Then Pollifaxen saw the marshal's badge pinned to Ben's shirt. "Quite a change."

"All things change, I've come to learn." Ben stared at the reason why he couldn't propose to Ellen Marsh. "Polly, did you knock over the Alta Mesa stage station?"

Pollifaxen pushed his hat back to his neck and stuck his thumbs in his belt. "Now, why ask me that?"

"Did you?"

"Listen, kid; if I did, you never could prove it. Even if there's a livin' witness, it could never be hung on me. For one thing, you're out of your jurisdiction. For another, my trail's been cold since Twin Oaks, as far as provin' anythin' is concerned—as far as identification goes. That was almost three years ago." He made a cigarette quickly and neatly. "An' for still another thing . . ." He swept a match aflame and lit up.

"For still another?"

Smoke sped from Pollifaxen's nostrils. "You'd never take me."

"Why not?"

"Because I wouldn't let you." He reached for the rifle. "See you still got that claybank."

Ben raised a leg and bent it around his pommel. "Where've you been, Polly?"

"Old Mexico." He was holding the rifle cross-body. "That posse jumped the herd near Chihuahua—the Silver Zero drive. We never did get to sell it. They killed Ten-High. Livin's been thin."

"Why don't you quit?"

"That's not my way, kid. I've got a career." And he smiled. "Hear you bagged

both Blackie McCall an' Sandy Matson."

"That's my career. Why don't you quit?"

"Tryin' to reform me?"

Ben shook his head. "Someday it'll be me and you standing in a street or on a desert shooting it out—to kill. I don't want that, Polly."

"Neither do I. Ben, you'd lose that contest. I didn't teach you all my tricks."

"I'm quick to learn others."

Pollifaxen nodded. "Go away now, Ben. We shook hands on it once, an' that should hold."

"Stay out of Alderville, Polly."

"Don't put any ideas into my head." Pollifaxen cocked the rifle. "Go away now."

Ben went away, and never looked back. He reached Alderville with the darkness and put up his horse. Deputy Howie was asleep in the office cubby and Ben kicked him awake. "Go get supper. I'll take the night side."

He sat in the lamplight and chain-smoked several cigarettes. He was faced with a decision again, and he knew what it would have to be. The question was, how to execute it?

"Consorting With A Known Outlaw," was the only charge in the warrant that was out for him, and it was a charge that under the old territorial statute then still in effect, would no longer be valid after one year. In this case: the fifteenth of next month. He could afford to gamble that against the possibility of Pollifaxen disclosing his past association. But he still owed Pollifaxen a chance at life, and he wanted to give it to him and get the debt paid. After that, he could continue with the execution of this second decision, which was to arrest, try and convict Pollifaxen. If Pollifaxen didn't kill him first.

That night the bank in Frontera was broken into and the watchman killed. John Neal, the marshal, was in Mexico searching for the Alta Mesa murderer, and the town had been undefended during the hours of darkness. The killer had been frightened off empty-handed by a posse in nightshirts and underdrawers.

When Ben Huntoon got the news, he carefully cleaned and carefully reloaded his .31-30. When he went out, he saw the swamper from the Sam Houston tacking a poster to a tree in front of the saloon. The poster announced that Ben Huntoon of Alderville was best-qualified for the office of county sheriff.

Ben walked that way, ripped the poster from the tree and threw it away. "Wait 'til later for that. I might not be here next month."

HE WENT out to the Silver Zero and found Ellen in back, pegging small-bore shots at tin cans. Her light gun snatted angrily and the cans bounced brightly in the sunlight.

He said, "Not bad—for a girl."

She looked at him in surprise. "I'm getting ready for the badmen when they come." She whipped up her gun and flipped out the cylinder and started to reload.

"They coming back?"

"They might." Again she looked at him, this time with that strange puzzlement he had noted when they first met, here in this yard the year before.

"Lightning never strikes twice in the same place."

She said, "Lightning doesn't have to."

"Sharp this morning, aren't you?"

She placed the gun on a fencepost and regarded him coolly. "Where have you been?"

"Looking for lightning."

Marsh came out and eyed him shrewdly, as he would eye a steer at the auction block. "Haven't seen you recently."

"I've been running for election, against John Neal and Happy Swain. And from the results we've had, I think it'd be better if the Sam Houston's swamper or the town drunk got the job."

Marsh smiled. "Stay with it." He walked away and left them there.

Ellen said, "Want some lunch?"

"No thanks." He stepped toward her. "Ellen, you still worried about Spanish hitches and diamond hitches and such?"

She didn't answer for a moment, and puzzlement deepened in her eyes. "Sometimes I'm afraid of you, Ben. Sometimes I think I know why, and then I'm not sure that I do. A part of you is very strange."

"You're not a straight brand yourself. I've been gone more than a week, and all you do is knock tin cans off a fence." He resented his own anger because he didn't want to be angry.

"What do you want—a bear hug and your boots shined?" She stuck her gun in her belt. "You'd better not stay for lunch—or for anything else—Mister Big!" She ran into the house and slammed the door.

And that, thought Huntoon, *is that—for awhile at least. I've got work to do.*

CHAPTER THREE

Gallows Trick

HE MADE a long scout to the west bench, then to the north. The cave in the hills was empty, and the man Joe still unburied. Ben buried him. He lingered in the high timber for a day, but Pollifaxen didn't show up. Nothing showed up except some chattering jays and, once, a high-swinging buzzard.

He rode over to Alta Mesa and showed the new agent how to rig a shotgun trap in the rafters so that it could be sprung on anyone who was attempting to take the safe. Then he trailed down to Frontera and had a talk with John Neal. Neal said he hadn't found a thing in Mexico. Ben asked him what he would have done if he had found this man:

Neal spat and went on with his whittling. "Arranged for my own extradition proceedin's." And he patted his holster.

It was twilight when Ben returned to Alderville and relieved young Howie. There was nothing for the deputy to report except that some citizens wanted to form a posse of "vigilantes" and devise their own laws. Nothing except a notable quiet in the streets, and a certain stiffness of shoulder to passing people. They were alert, now.

The sharp darkness which comes to the desert dropped swiftly. Along Main Street, house lights and store lights threw thin lanes across the gleaming tar surface. The swift-acridness of it rose to the nostrils.

Ben Huntoon, as he walked, had a curious sensation that was difficult for him to analyze. There was a feeling in the darkness of breath being held, of catastrophe hovering ahead.

He remembered the first time he had seen Pollifaxen, when he had been sitting trailside in his stockinged feet and had known instinctively that the man was danger itself. That the danger would return to plague him, he'd had no way of knowing.

A fine, full moon floated low on the horizon, and the deep dust of the desert was shining like flaked silver. A coyote challenged the moonlight to come and find him.

Ben turned into the restaurant and had his supper. That finished, he tramped the town restlessly, wanting to get his hands on his trouble and break it or else have it break him. He had to get it over with, one way or another. It was like a sore tooth that throbs and jumps; it makes you nervous and irritable, and you know that it must come out and that you cannot carry it forever. It isn't the sore tooth that bothers you so much as it is the thought of having it removed.

OPPOSITE the bank, a soft voice came from an alleyhead—"Kid?"

Ben whirled. There was nothing there but purple depths and the smell of straw.

"Ben?" A lean shadow moved, became a figure, materialized into the shape of a man standing just inside the alley, hands on holsters and boots spread wide apart. "Your old pal Polly."

"What do you want here, Polly?"

Pollifaxen chuckled. "Always did like Alderville . . . See you planted Joe."

"I like my funerals quick."

"So do I." Pollifaxen's fingers interlaced and rolled. The scent of damp tobacco was sharp. His hands went to his face, and matchlight flared. His eyes were two white knife-cuts fixed stonily on Ben. The match went out. "How's your girl, kid?"

Ben didn't answer. He glanced down the street, toward the intersection of Bowie and Main. Houses and stores were dark, but lights from the saloons, the Yucca House—all were pale on the tarred surface. A piano's quick melody struck out and threaded away and followed itself in continuous echoes into the moonlight.

But all that seemed far away, and not a part of where Ben was standing with hot death not a dozen feet from him. It all seemed like a picture hanging from a wall that he couldn't touch.

"Ben?" The cigarette crackled. "I see by the posters that you're up for sheriff. That's a long way for a horseless kid without work to come in one year."

"I always make my own breaks."

"The breaks are where you find 'em."

"Have you found many?"

Pollifaxen chuckled again—a purling throat noise that had no mirth to it, only mockery. "Go to church much?"

"Polly, get out of town and stay out of it."

The cigarette perked upward. "Don't be a damned fool."

"I'm telling you, Polly—get out, and don't come back. I mean this."

"Is that a threat?" The cigarette drooped dangerously.

Ben took a step closer to the alleyhead. "What are you after? The bank?"

"Maybe the railroad payroll, where they're layin' that spur line."

Ben was six feet from the man. "I owe you one escape, Polly. You took Yount's bullet for me. This is the payment—take the claybank, and ride on out of Aderville."

Pollifaxen laughed at him. "Got a good horse of my own." The cigarette fell to the ground and burst in a tiny shower of sparks. A boot erased them.

Then as suddenly as Pollifaxen's voice had come, his body vanished. There was nothing there but the faint aroma of burnt tobacco. Ben entered the alley cautiously, feeling outward. He came to the end and stepped into the livery yard in time to see Pollifaxen riding west into the moonlight.

Ben's claybank was stabled for the night, so he borrowed a horse from the liveryman and rode west after Pollifaxen. He rode for five miles, past the end-of-track where a lamp shone in the lone construction shack, past the south border of Marsh's fence; past broken country where night shadows lay deep and jagged in scattered arroyos.

Then he heard his name called and he yanked his horse down to its haunches. Pollifaxen was saying, "Didn't I tell you once, always stay behind a man an' he'll never find you? Make him think he's followin' you, then tag him in the back?"

Ben turned toward the voice, though he couldn't see the man. He steadied his horse. "Are you going to tag me, Polly?"

"I might."

Anger swelled in Ben Huntoon. It licked flame-sharp into his skull and brought a dry-throated curse from his dry lips. He heard the muted *snick!* of a hammer being cocked.

Pollifaxen's voice. "You tagged Yount for me, kid, so that leaves us even. Stay away from me. You're in my sights now. The next time, I'll shoot."

There was a clumping of boots, a creak of leather, and the sudden slashing of a horse at the gallop. Hoofbeats rolled away softly, like distant gunfire.

Ben did not attempt to follow. He was outside town jurisdiction, and he wanted to get Pollifaxen within his own domain and well inside the borders of conscience. No wild night murdering for him: he

wanted it as a sure thing, with the goods. With current guilt on Pollifaxen's hands. He wanted it in defense of Alderville.

Riding back to town through dying moonlight, he had a hunch that the next time he met his trouble, he would succeed in getting his hands on it. He had a further hunch that that time was awfully close.

HE SPENT his days and nights in Alderville after that, abandoning the hills and deserts in implied invitation to Pollifaxen to come on in. He trod the streets ceaselessly, making himself seen in order to relax some of the tension that was in people. He slept on a cot in the office, even when young Howie had the night side. Howie was studying law, but the light did not bother Ben. He lay with an arm across his eyes, his boots on and his belt buckled.

Each night he had his drink at either the Sam Houston or the Yucca House, and then he would tramp the town. The tension went out of the people, but it tightened in him. He never slept, he cat-napped. He was always on duty.

On the morning of the day that his trouble finally ended, he rose early. The town bum lay asleep in an alley next to the Sam Houston, and Ben rolled him over and straightened him out so that a passing rig wouldn't crush his legs.

He left brief greetings with barmen, with floormen, with swampers. With merchants and with the banker, Mr. Goddard—whose name had once been Goatherd, which was his grandfather's literal translation of Ziegenhirte, the family name in Germany. Thus the nomenclature of finance in a growing country.

Turning into Bowie, Ben paused at the side door of the Yucca House, which had the corner location, and nodded to the day barman. The barman muttered. "Heerd last night from a customer that Pollifaxen's comin' to town."

"Who was the customer?"

"Don't know. A man who said he'd been lookin' for the Lost Adams Diggin's, an' that he'd heerd Polly braggin' about Alderville havin' a half-growed boy for a marshal. So there you have it." The barman wiped his hands on some waste.

Out beyond the end of Bowie, the desert shimmered with thickening heat. Ben Huntoon strolled to the east side of town and glanced once at the mound that was boothill, speculating upon the deeds of those who had died by violence and in shame. He saw the graves of McCall and Matson.

Afterwards he criss-crossed Alderville, prowling like a restless cat, and came finally to the verandah of the Yucca House and put his shoulder to a cornice, apparently indifferent.

Life moved without haste. Mrs. Goddard appeared and moved gracefully down Main with her parasol lifted against the sun. Huntoon watched her. She turned into Bowie and headed for the linen shop, serene and untouchable in the rawness of this town, leaving behind her a picture of genteel grace. The town bum woke up, snorted, let out a yell and charged back to the livery yard to fight the Apaches who were pouring by the thousands out of the heat haze. The liveryman got him by the collar, held a bottle to his lips, and brought the battle to a close. Mrs. Goddard moved sedately on.

One of the girls from Jennie Jack's came out onto the upper porch and yawned. She was wearing a flowered kimono loosely, as if it was too hot and heavy for her. She waved to Huntoon, and he waved back. It had become a fetish with him to know all the people he was hired to protect. The girl yawned again, and turned away.

The hour of noon was striking from the cool lobby of the Yucca House when the Alta Mesa stage rolled into Main and slacked down from a dead run. Dandy Daniels tooled his teams exactly to the hotel steps and clapped on his brake. A lone passenger, bearing marks of travel, crawled out and shook dust from his trav-

eling coat. He was a big-headed man with a long nose and sleepy blue eyes. Pale mustaches blurred the ends of his upper lip.

The sun edged west in the hot blue sky and heat began to accumulate in the streets. The lone passenger eyed Ben Huntoon suspiciously, coughed dust and entered the hotel. A minute later he was out on the verandah again.

"You Huntoon? The marshal?"

"I am."

The man offered a bony hand. "My name's Busher. I'm from the express company. We want to know who held up the Alta Mesa Station. We'll give five thousand dollars to find out."

"Everyone wants to know." Ben shook hands. "Got any ideas?"

Busher looked glum. He touched one end of his moustaches with a curled finger, then the other. He said, "No."

"Same man who busted into the Frontera bank, probably. He's been hitting here and there."

"Yes," Busher sniffed like a tired dog. "Seems quiet enough."

"Sin keeps late hours. Had lunch?"

"No. Let's go in." He led the way to the dining room. "That was a nice shotgun trap you rigged at Alta Mesa. Tell me all you know about these killings. Maybe we can work together."

"Maybe."

Busher picked up a hand-inscribed menu and blinked wearily at it. He looked as if he might fall apart at any moment. "No oysters?"

AT THREE O'CLOCK that afternoon, the piano player at the Sam Houston had his breakfast of sour mash and beans, and lit a huge cigar. He put some come-on coins in a saucer and placed the saucer on top of the piano. Then he sat down to limber up his fingers.

Alderville was flexing its muscles for the night.

At five o'clock, a dusty man rode in from the desert and dismounted at the Sam Houston. When he walked into the saloon, Ben Huntoon noted that he had a decided limp. When he walked out of the saloon, Ben knew who he was. He was Gimp, who had been chased away from Chihuahua the year before along with Pecos and Ten-High.

Gimp rolled a cigarette, his eyes striking at the town as he lit it. When he saw Ben Huntoon sitting in front of the hotel with Busher, his face remained completely blank. Then he mounted his horse and loped away from Alderville.

Ben snubbed out his cigarette. "Busher, I claim first shot at this man. It's personal, with me."

"Is he coming?"

"Sooner or later. But there's no need for you to get hurt. I want to handle it."

"If you survive, we'll get drunk. If you don't survive, I'll have to take him. Please survive." He got up and went into the hotel.

At nine o'clock, the night was soft velvet. Out beyond town, the land lay empty and silent, swathed in purple and silver shadows, with the formless rim of hills shaped against lesser darkness in the distance. Alderville's stores were closed, but its saloons and restaurants and hotel were loud and glittering.

Men trudged in errant waves from street to street, batting through swinging doors and stamping up alkali dust. The town bum stood in the middle of Bowie, early drunk and flaying his arms in wild circles, laying about him at imagined enemies.

Young Howie, the deputy, came into the marshal's office and asked Ben if there was anything new. He dumped law books on the desk and strapped a gun around his waist.

"I'll take the night side again," Ben told him. "Go home and read Blackstone."

Howie frowned at him.

Ben went on, "I have a feeling that Polly is coming. I want to play it alone, close to the belly. Busher's here."

"From the express?" Howie nodded thoughtfully. "I'll hang around anyway."

"No, go home."

"Well . . ." Howie picked up his books and left.

Ben stepped out after him. Coming to the corner of Bowie, he took a practiced look at the crowd, gauged its temper, saw the things he needed to know about it, and set out on his rounds.

POLLIFAXEN and Gimp parted company at the far end of Bowie, where it dipped into a draw and became a desert track. "Behind the bank in two hours, then."

Gimp saw Huntoon take the drunken man by a flying arm and lead him away. Pollifaxen, slipping up Bowie, saw that too. He turned into an alley behind the hotel and entered the kitchen.

The fat Mexican chef looked up, startled; and Pollifaxen gave him a gold coin. "You never saw me." He looked into the barroom. Huntoon wasn't there. He retreated through the kitchen and followed alley-ends halfway the length of Main before he crept forward again to the street, this time from the livery yard alley, which opened on Main opposite the bank. It was where he had his talk with Huntoon. Matchlight touched him briefly as he lit a cigarette; it showed the faintest sweat damp on his drawn features.

Ten o'clock struck softly from somewhere.

He waited for half an hour, then slipped north around the tarred end of Main and so across to the bank. He planned to wait behind the building until Gimp came from the other end of town. Then they would dig into the cellar vault and use muffled dynamite for the job. After that, they would walk calmly to their horses in the draw at the end of Bowie and leave town, the cash folded neatly in their boots and pockets. If young Ben tried to interfere, it would be too damned bad for him. Their debts were even now.

Huntoon left the hotel verandah and thrust himself through the crowds, moving men aside with a push of his shoulder. It was almost eleven oclock, and he figured that he had an hour of grace. He strolled Main, peering into lighted places, testing the doors of darkened ones. He smoked a cigarette, and watched the crowds drift past. His eye was taken by a man who was limping down Bowie, and out of sight.

On a hunch, he went to the livery yard and up the alley leading from it to Main. He came to the head of the alley, knelt, and felt the trampled dust with his fingers.

He found what he wanted: a still-warm cigarette stub. He cut back through the livery yard and came out by the Yucca House and crossed to Bowie. He saw Gimp limping north behind Jennie Jack's, stumping in the direction of the bank.

So Ben Huntoon wheeled and walked up Main, paralleling the course that Gimp was taking, and separated from him by the buildings. He walked quickly, and turned to his right down the alley separating a store from the bank. He was now between Pollifaxen—or where he imagined him to be—and Gimp, but blind to both of them. He heard a spur clink from his left, from behind the bank. Presently he heard a footstep in gravel from his right, from the direction of Bowie. That would be Gimp laboring through flung trash.

He sidled to the corner of the bank and whispered, "Polly?"

A moment of silence. "Gimp?"

"Yeah."

Pollifaxen started toward him. Ben had his left shoulder close against the side of the building, watching to his right—the darkness where Gimp was moving. He called, "Gimp?"

The night stood still. Then from the darkness: "Polly?"

In that instant Pollifaxen got the play, saw the trap they both were being sucked into. "Look out, Gimp!" He fired in Ben's direction. The echo of the shot ran on and died beyond town. Gimp was confused, and

when he fired, it was at the only figure he saw—Pollifaxen. He missed, because Pollifaxen had dropped flat, equally confused. So when Gimp started for the protection of a cellar door, crawling on hands and knees, Pollifaxen fired because he thought Gimp was Huntoon, wounded.

Gimp relaxed and lay still. Pollifaxen's slug had smashed through his skull and carried away his hat.

Huntoon ran softly back to Main Street, crossed the front of the bank and ran to its rear. When he side-stepped around the back corner, he saw Pollifaxen side-stepping around the other back corner, where he had just been.

He called, "Polly?"

Pollifaxen wheeled full around, seeing nothing for a moment. He wheeled again and glanced upward, hoping to see a face on the roof.

"Here, Polly, like you always said. Behind a man, while he thinks—" Ben dodged backward as Pollifaxen's gun blasted three times.

The bullets chipped brick dust from the building.

Ben moved swiftly, to throw the man off balance and take him by surprise. He fired low, wanting to break knees and legs. He didn't want to kill the man. Pollifaxen went down writhing, unable to reload. He was soaked from belt to knees with blood; he was breathing lightly and hurriedly, like a child blowing on candles.

Howie came running. Busher came running. Mr. Goddard brought a lamp. He said, "This seems to be quite a spot for you, Marshal." In the lamplight, Ben saw Pollifaxen's thin features, his ragged clothes. He was trail-worn to the core. He must have needed the bank's money very much.

The swamper from the Sam Houston was there. He said, "That poster goes onto the tree right now. Your 'lection's in the bag."

Ben sent for a doctor. He knelt to Pollifaxen and said, "I'll take your armor now, Polly. How many guns have you got—just this one .44?"

Pollifaxen's eyes were absolutely empty, with no light in them at all. He kept his teeth clamped shut against the recurring pain of his wounds, refusing to wince or cry out.

The doctor bustled up, but Pollifaxen never took his eyes from Ben Huntoon.

BULLETS WILD AT BLOODRUN

By Robert W. Krepps

When the ghost of Billy the Kid thundered back to Bloodrun, it took more than hot lead to drop him—it took the same blazing sixes that had once felled the Kid himself! Truly an unforgettable novelette of one of the West's great gunslingers—don't miss it!

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Their emptiness gradually filled with a strangely luminous glow, almost like dawning respect.

THE trial was held in a tent that covered the area where the courthouse someday would stand.

It opened at eight o'clock in the morning, and the case went to the jury at noon. All through it, Pollifaxen sat in a reclining chair with his splinter legs angling downward. He was aloof and silent. He refused to testify in his own behalf. He listened to the testimony of the change boy from the Alta Mesa Station without blinking. He never mentioned the old warrant that was out against Ben—even when Ben dared him with his eyes to do it.

The jury came in at twelve-ten with a verdict of guilty, and Pollifaxen was sentenced to be hanged the next day—August 16th.

Ben took him in a rig to the one-cell jail and locked him up. Then he asked the question that had been tormenting him: "Why didn't you tell them about me? That warrant's not dead until midnight tonight. You can at least finish me in this town—for what I did to you."

"You've got your career, an' I've got mine." It was the first time he had spoken all day. "I play it as dealt." And that was all that he said.

The next day was windy, with cloud scud riding low across the skies. Ben had asked the judge for permission to drop the prisoner through a trap and end the thing quickly. But the judge was from Frontera, and he owned an interest in the stage line. He ruled: No. "You hang him like I said. Let him dangle."

And that was how it was done.

Howie supported those splinted limbs while Ben adjusted the noose. He asked gently, "Want a blindfold, Polly?"

"Hell, no."

"I'll tie your hands now. Put them in back of you."

Then Pollifaxen did something that brought a great gasp from the crowd and caused the marshals to go for their guns. He darted a hand deep into his trousers and whipped out a double-barreled derringer. Then he laughed and slung it at Ben. "That's one trick I never taught you, kid. Always keep an ace-in-the-hole tied to the inside of your leg." He laughed again.

Ben whispered, "Why didn't you use it, Polly?"

Pollifaxen shook his head slowly. "Not my way, kid. . . . Never forget the trick, though."

Ben Huntoon had to squeeze his eyes shut to keep the tears in when he hauled on the rope.

Later, when they lowered that blue-faced body into its crude coffin, Ben fished a twenty-dollar gold piece from his pocket and tucked it into one of the dead man's pockets.

Marsh gave him a ride out to the Silver Zero in the big rig.

"That could have been bad for you, Ben—that gun he had hidden."

"I don't get it. He could have killed me anytime, or killed himself. Why didn't he do it?"

"I'll tell you why. Killers live and die by feeling, like animals. When this one was trapped and shot by one of his own former pupils—" Marsh enjoyed Ben's start of surprise—"he knew the play was over, that he'd never be any good again. After that, it was a matter of pride to keep his chin up—to go out standing straight."

"You knew? You and Ellen?"

Marsh smiled wanly. "I sort of guessed it, but Ellen didn't. And it was worth it to watch you leave that school and build one of your own."

Ellen was waiting for them, and there was no mistrust in her as she took Ben's arm and led him inside.

He turned once and glanced up at the gray skies and raised his right hand in a quick farewell salute. ⁂ ⁂ ⁂

The three began to fire and all hell broke loose. . . .

SATAN SENT THREE!

By ROBERT L. TRIMNELL

One of these days, the outlaw, Lister, and his gunhands would go too far. They might even rile that peaceable storekeeper, Juan Mordales, and they'd be a sight safer to seek out the devil himself and spit square in his eye!

JUAN MORDALES was standing in the doorway of the shop when he heard the first shot. It was not far up the street, and yet it did not entirely break the stream of his thoughts.

He had been watching the Widow Perez walk down the street, and he was thinking

her a fine figure of a woman. She was no slip of a girl, but of proper age for a man who was past fifty, and finding gray hair at his temples. It was a grayness slow to come because of the share of Indio blood that he bore, but it was coming. Let's see, it was in '55 when she married Guillermo Perez—he remembered the wedding well—it was shortly after the birth of his daughter, Juanita. The Widow Perez had been a mere child then, and must now be less than forty.

It would be agreeable to have a woman in the house again, Juan thought. His own wife was dead these three years. The woman who came in and cleaned was far from dependable. Besides, Juanita was at an age to take interest in young men. The advice of an older woman would help her, and would set Juan's mind much at ease. And, the widow of Perez was a fine figure of a woman. Not fat by any means, but plump and with a comfortable way about her.

There was a regular fusillade of shots down the street now, and the clatter of heels running rapidly. Gringos running. Juan's lip stiffened. He knew they were gringos because few Mexicans wore boots. Juan favored slippers even when he rode a horse, which was often in the season of hunting deer in the mountains. The slippers were comfortable in wooden, box stirrups. But these were gringo heels clattering, and he knew what that meant. Someone had refused to be pressured by Kyle Lister, and so there was shooting.

Up and down the street he heard doors slam closed, as the Mexican quarter of Hermosa holed up and pretended nothing was happening. Juan did not move. He stood square and solid in the doorway, not tall, but broad of chest and rigid with pride. *Aiee,* he thought, when General Taylor's Yanquis charged at Monterrey, did *Sargento* Juan Mordales hide behind a closed door? He was young then and he'd stood his ground and fired his muzzle-loading rifle, reloaded coolly in the face of the Yanqui fire, and between shots glanced at his officers, hoping that the order to charge would come. His bayonet had been fixed and he was ready. Mexico had lost at Monterrey, but Juan Mordales had proven his right to wear *sargento's* stripes.

Now he saw a tall, rawboned fellow race past him. Suddenly the man turned and fired his hand gun back up the street. He was not fleeing, but retreating in order. He turned and ran again, reluctantly, as though he hated to run but could not stand alone against them. Juan caught the flash of the young man's eyes; cool gray, his face intent but unworried.

"Papa, papa, can't we do something?" a voice cried from behind him.

"Let the *gringos* keep their trouble," Juan growled. He turned and looked at his daughter. She was small, with a flood of curly black hair over her shoulders and down her back, enough pretty hair for a great tall woman. Her face was quite pale now and her brown eyes wide. "But the poor man, and you know how it is, that *diablo* Lister—"

She broke off. The pursuers were before their door now. Four in the first bunch, hard eyed, flat-lipped men, cursing as they ran. A hawk-faced one swung around to Juan and growled, "You, greaser—where'd he go?"

"Past," Juan said, his eyes level, and, if his brown eyes ever could be, cold. He saw the hawk-faced man's glance slide past him and stop on Juanita. The man turned and ran on down the street, yet leaving behind a yellow look that Juan could visualize as hanging still on the air between him and the girl. Juan heard her heels clatter out to the back of the store, and through to the living quarters.

Juan glanced at his hunting rifle. It hung on two spaced mule-deer antlers above the shelves of the hardware section of the store, almost hidden by several large balls of twine of varying strength that hung from the ceiling. That rifle now, it had killed

many deer, and it would kill a gringo if this man let that yellow look hang on Juanita again. His name was Dolph Candler, and he was right-hand man to Kyle Lister. But that did not matter if his yellow look hung in the doorway again.

KYLE LISTER had come in with a wave of newcomers that had swept over Hermosa a year ago. The silver strike outside of town had brought them. The silver mines there did not seem primed to shake the mining world, but had attracted many. Among them, Kyle Lister and a half dozen gun toughs.

Beyond doubt, this shooting trouble today was because the young man had refused to pay for Lister's protection. Everyone paid Lister. His men collected donations for the school, for instance. The school was very shabby, but Kyle Lister's men were not. They wore silk shirts—bought locally at a discount—and hand-tooled boots, also sold at a discount. You always sold cheap to Lister's men. Their girl friends were well-dressed too. In fact, that's where most of the money ended up. Lister's men were indifferent. There was more to be had.

His eyes lingered on the rifle, and he decided that Dolph Candler had best stick to the fancy women at the Silver Wheel saloon, or Juan Mordales would return to the wars.

If only we'd had such rifles at Monterrey, he thought. The Texians—the Texas Rangers in particular, brought their Walker Colts and soon Taylor's army adopted them. It was Juan Mordales' opinion that those repeating guns were what had cost Mexico its northern lands, from Texas to California.

The men were coming back now, cursing. Their quarry seemed to have escaped. Juan saw Dolph Candler look at the open doorway, but not seeing the girl, and meeting the brown stoniness of Juan's eyes, passed on.

Slowly, the doors along the street began to swing open again.

There was much chattering up and down the street. Juan paid it little heed. He was soon busy dragging every harness out of the storeroom for the inspection of Pepito Torreon, a farmer from down the valley, and a shrewd bargainer. Then, Mestera the carpenter came in for nails, and he sorted out a mere handful of ten different sizes. Mestera was a miserly buyer. The kind of man who would go to a store and buy one egg, because if he bought two, one might spoil before he could eat it. Between Torreon and Mestera, Juan's temper built until he cried at Mestera, "*Pues*, how many little roofing nails will it be, then, two of each of the twelve varieties I have not in stock?"

When they were gone he realized they were no different than usual. It was that he was not himself today. He kept wishing he were a young man again with no more facing him than the business of shooting at Yanqui soldiers. Here we are now a territory of the United States, and they speak not our language and let unprincipled men like Kyle Lister run loose over us. It is not to be endured. No, one can not endure it!

He looked up at the rifle on the deer antlers.

Juanita came in then and got a bottle from the shelf by the window—the household remedies, partly hidden by the fly swatters hanging from the ceiling. He saw she was taking a bottle from the last row in the shelf—the paregoric.

"And what, *hijita mia*, would a young lady do with paregoric? Does she seek to cauterize the wounds of the mouse caught in the trap in the cellar?" She looked quickly at him. There was fear in her eyes, but her lips were tight and her small chin high and determined. She swept away out the back door without replying.

"Well, it is a fine note," he swore to himself. "One's own children do not reply on this lovely, cursed day. Paregoric. Growing up, she is. Her own ways!" Though it was

several years since Juanita's body had ceased to be flat, and dresses were thrown away because they were too slender to be altered to the pushing lines of womanhood, Juanita had never before stood against his will. He was not a domineering father, of a certainty, but she had never been hateful or obstinate toward him.

On sudden impulse he followed her through the storeroom to the kitchen. He stepped out the kitchen door to the garden, enclosed on the right by his house, to the left by the high, blank wall of his neighbor's house, and cut from the alley in back by a stout 'dobe wall.

It was a cool, shaded garden, thick with fruit trees and vines, producing vegetables and flowers, chickens and rabbits. It teemed with life. It took all of Juanita's foresightedness to rescue the grapes from the chickens, the rabbits from alley cats, the fruit trees' tender bark from the rabbits. It was Juan's outdoor home. There was a table and chairs in the shade, and—

And a young man sitting at the table, holding a roll of bandage against his bared arm.

JUANITA sat down beside him and removed the bandage. She uncorked the bottle of paregoric and splashed it over the bandage. The young man winced as she slapped the bandage on a long, ugly, torn streak of a wound. But then he grinned at her. There was warmth in his gray eyes now, not the angry coldness Juan had seen when he fired back at Lister's men.

"Your daughter kindly let me in the back gate," he said. "But I'm going to go soon—"

"Not until dark," Juan said abruptly. "It would not be safe." His eyes scanned the fellow. He wore dust-coated denims and plain cotton shirt and a worn hat. He looked weary and travel-stained. Nothing fancy about him; rather loose-jointed but well muscled. Tawny hair that needed trimming.

The youngster said, "I'm Sam Benton, Señor Mordales. I came in town this morning with a freight wagon load of general merchandise. Some army blankets I picked up cheap in Nogales, a couple sacks of beans, a half gross of plowshares. I figured the farmers around here must break plenty of plows on the rocks that pass for dirt around here. There's a guy stopped me outside of town and said to see a man named Lister. I saw this Lister—"

Juan sighed. "And you refused to pay him the value of ten per cent of your cargo."

"You mean he does this all the time? You mean this damn—". He blushed and said, "I'm sorry, Juanita—but this—this Lister, he rakes off on this town and nobody's tried to shoot him yet?"

Juan nodded. It was indeed a shameful fact. Lister's gunhands had the town terrorized. City Marshal Dan O'Hara had threatened to resign many times, but each time the citizens had persuaded him to stay. It was better than a Lister-appointed marshal.

"Many men have come here with the same attitude as you," Juan said. "All of them who have stayed, accepted Lister. You see, he gets much support from the lawless people who have also come in, the owners of the gambling houses and so on."

"Why, the dirty—" Sam Benton rose from his seat, his hand on the sixgun hanging from his lean hip. But Juanita grasped his arm, crying,

"Papa is right, Sam. There's nothing you can do! Really there's not!"

Juan noted her hand on his arm, and noted too that she had called him Sam. Youth nowadays lacked a sense of formality, that was of certain truth. A man she'd met in the past hour, she called Sam! Gringo habits!

Juan sighed. "There may be something I can do, Señor Benton. I may be able to arrange that you leave town in darkness tonight, with your wagon. Understand that it is dangerous for me to have

you here. So, it is important that you leave tonight."

"You mean, pay 'em what they want on my wagon and load?"

Juan shrugged. He was a storekeeper, and he knew that business consisted of selling something you didn't need to buy something you wanted. Lister had no need of a half gross of plowshares. It could be arranged.

He asked, "Is the arm badly torn, that you will need a doctor?"

"Just a scratch," Benton grinned. "This repair job is cut out to Juanita's size."

"Then I will depart. You will please remain. Juanita, I will have a friend come, and for the moment we will close the store."

He bowed formally and left them.

In a half hour they had exchanged first names. Indeed! Gringo ways. The boy would be calling him Juan, next. Or even worse, *Juanito,* a privilege reserved for women or men older than he. A man could have no peace of soul amidst all these gringos. *Por Dios,* if General Santa Anna had been able to obtain repeating rifles or a few gross of those Walker Colt guns, it might now be quite different. Different, of a truth. The red, white, and green banner of the Republic might still wave here in New Mexico Territory. *Territory,* indeed! No proper state, electing its own officials, but a *territory,* with a governor appointed from Washington!

Truly enough, this thinly-populated land had not been a state under Mexico either, but—damn the gringos anyway!

He hailed a small boy passing in the street and said, "I will pay a gordo, muchacho, if you'll go to the house of the Widow Perez, and tell her that Señor Mordales of the general store had need of conversation with her."

After the boy had raced down the dusty street, Juan glanced up at his rifle. He took a package of corn-husk papers from his pocket, spilled black tobacco in one of them, and rolled a cigarette. He did not smoke very much. A cigarette with his breakfast coffee, a couple after dinner with the peach brandy he distilled in his own cellar. Other cigarettes only if he were disturbed A fine mess. He twisted the cigarette closed. A man who'd foolishly tangled with Kyle Lister was hidden in his house. Juanita had invited him in. Juanita did not do such things. She enjoyed the dances at fiesta time, and she was popular, but she never chased the young men, as some did—another gringo trick they were learning.

The Widow Perez was worried. Her large brown eyes showed it. Her handsome bosom trembled with her breathing. Juan bowed to her.

"Doña Alvara," he said. "I ask you to do me a favor. I must go out on—umm—certain affairs, and would not wish to leave Juanita alone with a young gentleman guest of ours. I thought that a respectable lady like yourself—"

"Of course, Señor Mordales! Of truth, one understands." She smiled, much relieved. "We will hope that you may soon return and enjoy the pleasant air of the garden with us."

Juan smiled and admired her understanding. He took his hat then and bowed, and gave her the key to the front door.

Outside he paid a nickel to the boy who had carried the message, and walked down the street to the center of town.

HE HAD the feeling that he should be wearing a gun. He never carried a revolver. The hunting rifle was his weapon. But there was a feeling in town that called for guns, and one could not carry a rifle down Main Street. Of course there would be such a feeling. After each incident the Lister gang caused, there was bad feeling in town. People became sullen and wary, and many carried guns concealed in their pockets.

He left the narrow, walled streets of the old town, into the spacious avenue with its

wooden buildings and their wrought-iron or wood curliques and gingerbread fretwork—brought from New Orleans by the many Texans who were from that country. Farther down the street were new slab-fronted houses, evidence of the silver-boom growth. Juan thought them quite unsightly. But here in the center of town were nice pepper trees shading the buildings, and the buildings were solidly built and painted.

He met the City Marshal just after waving to Pedro, the barber. He lifted his hat to Marshal O'Hara, the Mexican way of saluting gentlemen, as well as ladies. O'Hara, a wrinkled man, somewhat older than Juan—he too had fought at Monterrey, but on the other side—was long used to the custom, and he touched his hat brim in return.

"Dammit, Juanito, I'm quittin'. I'm too old for this job. I can't do it myself, and none of your folks will help me—"

Juan thought, *Why should we? After you invaded our land, why should we help you?* He knew that O'Hara realized he was thinking that. There was always that between them, that certain stiffness from the unforgotten conflict of the past. As though the names Santa Anna and Scott and Taylor were still those of living, fighting men, and the Alamo, and Monterrey, and Buena Vista were just-past battles whose results were still being calculated.

"Perhaps the sheriff of the county would help," Juan suggested, knowing that the sheriff kept well to his county seat when there was trouble in Hermosa. The sheriff was not a man of great courage.

"He couldn't fight his way out of a paper bag, and he knows it," O'Hara growled. He whacked his palm on the handle of his .45. "I'm goin' to quit. I swear, I got a nice ranch out north that's growin' up to mesquite and nopal, and here I go luggin' this tin star around town like I was somebody important!" He slapped the star, hawked, spat.

"The wagon of this freighter fellow who was involved in the trouble," Juan said, "Has it been exposed to view?"

"Couple of Lister's hounds pawed through the load. All they found was some plowshares and stuff. Yeah, everybody sees it sittin' back there by the warehouse, but nobody's goin' to touch it. Nossir."

That was what Juan had wanted to learn. In a few minutes he continued on his way. He walked to the porch in front of the Silver Wheel, a giant saloon and pool room, painted a garish red. A couple of Lister's men lounged on the porch. They looked flat and cold at him as he mounted the steps. He had to walk around one of them, who took up most of the entrance way and would not move.

There was quite a hubbub inside. It was a large, gloomy place, with a tinkling piano in the back of it, a row of men at the bar and a large crowd around one of the pool tables. Suddenly a hoarse voice shouted, "Shutup! All of y'! I got a tricky shot here!"

The noise was silenced. Even the tinkling piano. Kyle Lister had spoken. Juan saw him now, a bullish man with greasy black hair, a giant diamond flickering on his tie. He was bent over the pool table. His opponent was a tall, slim, Mexican. His pointed-crown sombrero was cocked to one side and a cigarette hung from his lip. He leaned on a pool cue at the opposite of the table. Eladio Juaspel, one of Lister's lieutenants, and as mean a knife fighter as existed on the border. Sadly, Juan reflected that you could not blame all of Lister's work on the gringos.

Lister's elbow uncoiled smoothly and drove the pool cue. He stood back, watching, then cursed violently as his ball missed. A girl in a spangled dress sidled up next to him and said, "Hell, it was a good try, Kyle, honey."

He shoved her away with his burly arm. Looking up, he saw Juan. His pale eyes glinted, sensing that Juan wanted some-

thing. "Lookin' for me, Mex?" he asked.

Juan bit back his anger and nodded. "It is about the wagon."

Lister moved around the pool table, carrying his cue. "What about the wagon?"

"I have a store down the street, and many of my clients are farmers. I have been told that many plowshares are on the wagon. Too many, perhaps—but I could put them in stock. In fact, I might buy the wagon and the team with it, if the price was good, and if I could get it all."

"Hell. I'll make the price right. Didn't cost me much. " He threw back his head and laughed. The rest of them laughed too, and winked. Even the girl that Lister had so brusquely shoved away.

"Then I would like to test the horses tonight—I will hitch them to the load, with the help of one of your men, if you would let one help me, and see if they pull well. Then in the morning I will come and offer you a price."

"Hell. Good 'nuff. All I care is, we get that son that come in and didn't pay toll. One wagon ain't so much—it's just I don't let nobody git away without payin'. Did you ante up on the school fund this month?" His eyes narrowed, became murderous slits. He rasped the question more to those behind him, then to Juan. Eladio Juaspel was the collector for Juan's part of town. He said, "Si, Señor Lister, he paid."

Lister turned a beefy back on Juan and continued his game.

JUAN walked slowly home. His plan was for this Sam Benton to come up and shove a gun at himself and the Lister man who would be with him. The team already hitched, Benton would get away from town before an alarm was raised. It would have to be that way. Get Sam Benton and his load peacefully away from Hermosa, so he would be satisfied. With a Lister man along to witness the holdup, Juan would not be accused of helping Benton. And the dangerous guest would be gone from his house.

He sighed and knocked on the wooden door to his store. It was a hot, dry afternoon, and he welcomed the thought of sitting in his garden with a cup of coffee, to converse with the Widow Perez and his daughter—and the guest who made Juan so uncomfortable.

The wooden bar was slid from the door as he called his name. It was Juanita who opened it. He saw instantly, in spite of the relative darkness inside, the glow of her eyes, the bright pinkness of her cheeks. The girl was not normal today.

"Oh Papa, I'm glad you came. I worried—I know that you went to see Mr. Lister. Now we're going to have coffee."

He couldn't help smile, even though it was the young gringo who made her eyes sparkle and her cheeks bloom. She wore a lace-edged kerchief that was usually reserved for special occasions. Juan stood in the doorway smiling. Then he saw the sunlight on her face shadowed. Someone behind him had moved into the light.

"I swear, I didn't know they was so many pretty chickens in this mudhole town!"

Juan turned. Behind him towered Dolph Candler. He was grinning, a thin gash of broken teeth, and his yellow eyes hanging on the girl, his look oozing up and down over her. He licked his lips.

"Ain't you goin' to invite me in? Figgered I'd make a call."

Juan's anger choked up into his throat. His glance stabbed at the rifle hanging on the wall. He said stiffly, "I will talk to you outside, in the street. Now go. *Que se vaya*!"

The yellow eyes swung over to him. "Hell, ain't you a proddy son, for a greaser! Guess I'll invite myself in." He shouldered through into the store, past Juan, his enormous shoulders swaggering heavily. The girl retreated from him.

As coolly as he could, Juan said, "You

may leave—and I will try to forget this."

Candler swiveled around and spat, "Goddam right you can forget it!" and swung a big fist at Juan's face.

Juan ducked back and stumbled over a nest of buckets. They crashed onto the cement floor behind him. Off his balance, he could not guard against the fist. It smashed across his cheek and hurled him down on top of the clattering buckets.

The vision of the rifle flashed into his mind, but there was no chance to get the gun. He snatched a bucket up by the handle and flailed it up at the big man towering over him. Dolph Candler had his gun out, and he knocked the bucket aside with one blow of the heavy barrel. He brought the gun back, backhand, chopped it across Juan's scalp. Juan fell with stars blazing through his head.

With a cry of rage he was up and throwing another bucket at the man. He grabbed the gun arm, but Candler was not using that now. He kicked. His boot toe crashed into Juan's groin and knocked him sprawling. Now the gun was leveled on him and the giant was rasping, "Goddam y', I'll plant a hole 'tween yer eyes!"

"Not today ya won't."

The voice was from the kitchen door. Candler swung with his gun ready. Juan glimpsed Sam Benton there in the doorway, and then it all exploded in two searing red flashes and smoke mushroomed out around them. Candler screamed and staggered backward, lost his footing and careened off into a glass-fronted counter. The glass broke before his fall. His head went through and stopped on a shelf. Blood pumped out to mix with the broken glass. After a second it stopped pumping.

Slowly, Juan climbed to his feet. He walked to the door, closed and barred it. He did not look at the rest of them. He climbed the ladder up to the top of the hardware shelves and took down his hunting rifle. On the way down he got a box of shells.

He glanced only once at the dead man, then stuffed the magazine full of shells. Someone was hammering violently on the door.

Juanita had already shut the heavy wooden shutters, so they could not see out. But the rasping voice that went with the hammering sounded like City Marshal O'Hara.

Juan shouted, "If you are alone, you may enter, Marshal. We will unbolt the door but I will shoot anyone else who enters."

There was a sound of pounding feet outside, muted shouts and curses. After a minute Juanita opened the door while Sam Benton and Juan pointed their guns at it. The wiry figure of the marshal slipped through and they closed it behind him.

Juan asked, "Lister's men are out there in the street?" The marshal nodded. Juan said, "Then we will leave by the garden gate. We will circle the block and come up this street again, where we will shoot Lister's men."

He did not give them time to answer, but led off out the kitchen and through the garden. Four cups and saucers were laid out on the table, around a pot of steaming coffee. The Widow Perez and Juanita ran after him, clutching his arms, crying, "It is madness, they will kill you all!"

He paused at the gate and said, "When we have cleared them from the front, you will both go to the house of Señora Perez and lock yourselves in."

He led the marshal and Sam Benton outside, without asking their consent. He was Sargento Mordales, of the army of the Republic of Mexico, and he needed no one's consent. He marched them swiftly around the block, through the yard of Dalio the baker, and out to the street again. There they saw a crowd of men pounding on the door to Juan's store.

They swung out three abreast with Juan in the middle. The other two had their

guns drawn. Juan's rifle was cocked and held at waist height. He could shoot very accurately that way. They taught you that in the army, to shoot thus while advancing.

The men at the store turned, saw them, then dashed about, confused. One of them was the tall lieutenant of Lister's, Eladio Jaspel. He had fisted a gun and now cried out to the others and fired at the three advancing men. Juan triggered and saw surprise wash over the gunman's face as he collapsed like a puppet when the strings are let go.

The others broke and raced down the street. The three men walked steadily on, past the body of the Mexican, on toward the Silver Wheel. It was very easy for Juan now. His anger was all in his hands, and in his hands was the rifle. He had believed in what he had fought for at Monterrey. Now he believed again. He felt it was right that he walked side by side with these two gringos. The fact that Sam Benton might possibly become his son-in-law—for, who knew about those things—filled him with a strange new pride. Sam Benton was a man of courage, and that was enough.

SOON they were in the wideness of Main Street and walking directly toward the garish, red saloon. A man slipped out of the batwings and fired a gun at them. Their three weapons crashed as one and the man stumbled back inside.

Instantly a crush of men hurried out toward the three on the street, and behind them, shoving them on, came Kyle Lister, with a revolver in each hand. Strangely, the men seemed afraid, some of them running off the edge of the porch and away.

The three began to fire and it seemed all hell had broken loose. Besides the hammering of his own gun, Juan seemed to feel that he was the center of a whole platoon. But his sights were on Kyle Lister. He fixed the sights on Lister's eyes and fired.

With a moan, Lister came stumbling bullishly out onto the boardwalk, and fell on his face, unmoving. His men broke. Ran back through the saloon, off the porches. They were not firing, but fifty guns were hammering at those who had not escaped.

Somehow it was much later, when the hot stink of gunsmoke in the air was all that remained of the combat, that Juan realized how many were on his side. A score of men had come up behind him—farmers and cowboys and shopkeepers—and joined in the fray.

O'Hara said quietly, or so it seemed to Juan's hammering ears, "You sort of touched something off, Juanito."

And so he had. That evening, as he and Sam Benton sat alone in the garden, while Juanita and the Widow Perez prepared supper, the American asked:

"I know it's sudden, Senor Mordales—and maybe we oughta keep it between you and me for the time bein'—but you haven't got any objection to your daughter marryin' up with a—a gringo?"

Juan sighed. "In Mexico, most marriages are made for business reasons. But—your freight wagon could bring me goods from the railway warehouse at Nogales. That would be good business. Eh?"

Benton laughed. He'd drawn papers and tobacco from his pocket and offered them to Juan. "Smoke, Señor Mordales?"

Juan said, "Sam, you may call me Juan. One day you will call me that anyway. But *never* Juanito!"

He glanced at his rifle in the crotch of a peach tree where he'd placed it after cleaning and oiling the weapon. If Mexico had had a hundred such weapons at Monterrey. . . .

He sighed. In that case this youngster would not be calling him Juan, and the Widow Perez wouldn't be in his kitchen.

He looked again at the rifle, and now speculated less on Mexico and more on the fall hunting season.

YOU NEVER SEE APACHES . . .

By ELMORE LEONARD

It was the first time he had ever led into a canyon with such a strong premonition that Apaches were present. . . .

Angsman knew he was leading them into a trap, but he could only hope the Apaches would be more merciful than the gun-wild kid behind him.

BY NATURE, Angsman was a cautious man. From the shapeless specks that floated in the sky miles out over the plain, his gaze dropped slowly to the sand a few feet from his chin, then rose again, more slowly, to follow the gradual slope that fell away before him.

He rolled his body slightly from its prone position to reach the field glasses at his side, while his eyes continued to crawl out into the white-hot nothingness of the flats. Sun glare met alkali dust and danced before the slits of his eyes. And, far out, something moved. Something darker than the monotonous tone of the flats. A pinpoint of motion.

He put the glasses to his eyes and the glare stopped dancing and the small blur of motion cleared and enlarged as he corrected the focus. Two ponies and two pack animals. The mules were loaded high. He made that out right away, but it was minutes before he realized the riders were women. Two Indian women. Behind them, the scavenger birds floated above the scattered animal carcasses, circling lower as the human figures moved away.

Angsman pushed himself up from the sand and made his way back through the pines that closed in on the promontory. A few dozen yards of the darkness of the pines and then abruptly the glare was forcing against sand again where the openness of the trail followed the shoulder of the hill. He stopped at the edge of the trees, took his hat off and rubbed the red line where the sweatband had stuck. His mustache drooped untrimmed toward dark, tight cheeks, giving his face a look of sadness. A stern, sun-scarred sadness. It was the type of face that needed the soft shadow of a hat brim to make it look complete. Shadows to soften the gaunt angles. It was an intelligent, impassive face, in its late thirties. He looked at the three men by the horses and then moved toward them.

Ygenio Baca sat crosslegged in the dust smoking a cigarette, drawing deep, and he only glanced at Angsman as he approached. He drew long on his cigarette, then held it close to his eyes and examined it as some rare object as the smoke curled from his mouth. Ygenio Baca, the mozo, had few concerns.

Ed Hyde's stocky frame was almost beneath his horse's head with a hand lifted to the horse's muzzle. The horse's nose moved gently against the big palm, licking the salty perspiration from hand and wrist. In the other arm Hyde cradled a Sharp's rifle. His squinting features were obscure beneath the hat tilted close to his eyes. Sun, wind and a week's beard gave his face a puffy, raw appearance that was wild, but at the same time soft and hazy. There was about him a look of sluggishness that contrasted with the leanness of Angsman.

Billy Guay stood indolently with his thumbs hooked in his gun belts. He took a few steps in Angsman's direction and pushed his hat to the back of his head though the sun was beating full in his face. He was half Ed Hyde's age, a few years or so out of his teens, but there was a hardness about the eyes that contrasted with his soft features. Features that were all the more youthful, and even feminine, because of the long blond hair that covered the tops of his ears and hung unkempt over his shirt collar. Watching Angsman, his mouth was tight as if daring him to say something that he would not agree with.

Angsman walked past him to Ed Hyde. He was about to say something, but stopped when Billy Guay turned and grabbed his arm.

"The dust cloud was buffalo like I said, wasn't it?" Billy Guay asked, but there was more statement of fact than question in his loud voice.

Angsman's serious face turned to the boy, but looked back to Ed Hyde when he said, "There're two Indian women out there cleaning up after a hunting party. The dust cloud was the warriors going home. I suspect they're the last ones. Stragglers. Everyone else out of sight already."

Billy Guay pushed in close to the two men. "Dammit, the cloud could have still been buffalo," he said. "Who says you know so damn much!"

Ed Hyde looked from one to the other

like an unbiased spectator. He dropped the long buffalo rifle stock down in front of him. His worn, black serge coat strained tight at the armpits as he lifted his hands to pat his coat pockets. From the right one he drew a half-chewed tobacco plug.

For a moment Angsman just stared at Billy Guay. Finally he said, "Look, boy, for a good many years it's been my business to know so damn much. Now you'll take my word that the dust cloud was a Indian hunting party and act on it like I see fit, or else we turn around and go back."

Ed Hyde's grizzled head jerked up suddenly. He said, "You're dead right, Angsman. There ain't been buffalo this far south for ten years." He looked at the boy and spoke easier. "Take my word for it, Billy," he smiled. "If anybody knows it, I do. Those Indians most likely ran down a deer herd. But hell, deer, buffalo, what's the difference? We're not out here for game. You just follow along with what Angsman here says and we all go home rich men. Take things slow, Billy, and you breathe easier."

"I just want to know why's he got to give all the orders," Billy Guay said, and his voice was rising. "It's us that own the map, not him. Where'd he be without us!"

Angsman's voice was the same, unhurried, unexcited, when he said, "I'll tell you. I'd still be back at Bowie guiding for cavalry who ride with their eyes open and know how to keep their mouths shut in Apache country." He didn't wait for a reply, but turned and walked toward the dun-colored mare. "Ygenio," he called to the Mexican still sitting crosslegged on the ground, "hold the mules a good fifty yards behind us and keep your eyes on me."

EIGHT days out of Wilcox and the strain was beginning to tell. It had been bad from the first day. Now they were in the foothills of the Mogollons and it was no better. Angsman had thought that as soon as they climbed from the dust of the plains the tension would ease and the boy would be easier to handle, but Billy Guay continued to grumble with his thumbs in his gun belts and disagree with everything that was said. And Ed Hyde continued to say nothing unless turning back was mentioned.

Since early morning their trail had followed this pine-covered crest that angled irregularly between the massive rock peaks to the south and east and the white-gold plain to the west. Most of the way, the trail had held to the shoulder, turning, twisting and falling with the contour of the hillcrest. And from the west, the openness of the plains continued to cling in glaring monotony. Most of the time Angsman's eyes scanned the openness, and the small, black specks continued to crawl along in his vision.

The trail dipped abruptly into a dry creek basin that slanted down from between rocky humps looming close to the right. Angsman reined his mount diagonally down the bank, then at the bottom kicked hard to send the mare into a fast start up the opposite bank. The gravel loosened and fell away as hoofs dug through the dry crust to clink against the sandy rock. Momentarily the horse began to fall back, but Angsman spurred again and grunted something close to her ear to make the mare heave and kick up over the bank.

He rode on a few yards before turning to wait for the others.

Billy Guay reached the creek bank and yelled across, without hesitating, "Hey Angsman, you tryin' to pick the roughest damn trail you can find?"

The scout winced as the voice slammed against the towering rock walls and drifted over the flats, vibrating and repeating far off in the distance. He threw off and ran to the creek bank. Billy Guay began to laugh as the echo came back to him. "Damn, Ed. You hear that!" His voice carried clear and loud across the arroyo. Angsman put a finger to his mouth and shook his

head repeatedly when he saw Ed Hyde looking his way. Then Hyde leaned close and said something to the boy. He heard Billy Guay swear, but not so loud, and then there was silence.

Now, ten days from the time the message had brought him to the hotel in Wilcox, he wasn't so sure it was worth it.

In the hotel room, Hyde had come to the point immediately. Anxiety showed on his face, but he smiled when he asked the point-blank question, "How'd you like to be worth half a hundred thousand dollars?" With that he waved the piece of dirty paper in front of Angsman's face. "It's right here. Find us the picture of a Spanish sombrero and we're rich." That simply.

Angsman had all the time in the world. He smoked a cigarette and thought. Then he asked, "Why me? There're a lot of prospectors around here."

Hyde did something with his eye that resembled a wink. "You're well recommended here in Wilcox. They say you know the country better than most. And the Apaches better than anybody," Hyde said with a hint of self-pride for knowing so much about the scout. "Billy here and I'll give you a equal share of everything we find if you can guide us to one little X on a piece of paper."

Billy Guay had said little that first meeting. He half-sat on the small window ledge trying to stare Angsman down when the scout looked at him. And Angsman smiled when he noticed the boy's two low-slung pistols, thinking a man must be a pretty poor shot with one pistol that he'd have to carry another. And when Billy Guay tried to stare him down, he stared back with the half-smile and it made the boy all the madder; so mad that often, then, he interrupted Hyde to let somebody know that he had something to say about the business at hand.

Ed Hyde told a story of a lost mine and a prospector who had found the mine, but was unable to take any gold out because of Indians, and who was lucky to get out with just his skin. He referred to the prospector always as "my friend," and finally it turned out that "my friend" was buffalo hunting out of Tascosa in the Panhandle, along with Ed Hyde, raising a stake to try the mine again, when he "took sick and died." The two of them were out on a hunt when it happened, and he left the map to Hyde, "since I saw him through his sickness." Ed Hyde remained silent for a considerable length of time after telling of the death of his friend.

Then he added, "I met Billy here later on and took to him cause he's got the nerve for this kind of business." He looked at Billy Guay as a man looks at a younger man and sees his own youth. "Just one thing more, mister," he added. "If you say yes and look at the map, you don't leave our sight."

In the Southwest, lost mine stories are common. Angsman had heard many, and knew even more prospectors who chased the legends. He had seen a few become rich. But it wasn't so much the desire for gold that finally prompted him to go along. Cochise had promised peace and Geronimo had scurried south to the Sierra Madres. All was quiet in his territory. Too quiet. He had told himself he would go merely as an escape from boredom. Still, it was hard to keep the wealth aspect from cropping into the thought. Angsman saw the years slipping by with nothing to show for them but a scarred Spanish saddle and an old model Winchester. All he had to do was lead them to a canyon and a rock formation that looked like a Spanish hat.

Two days to collect the equipment and round up a mozo who wasn't afraid to drive mules into that part of Apacheria where there was no peace. For cigarettes and a full belly, Ygenio Baca would drive his mules to the gates of hell.

IT WAS almost a mile past the arroyo crossing that Angsman noticed his black specks had disappeared from the open flats.

For the past few hundred yards his vision to the left had been blocked by dense pines. Now the plains yawned wide again, and his glasses inched over the vastness in all directions, then stopped where a spur jutted out from the hillside ahead to cut his vision. The Indian women had vanished.

Hyde and Billy Guay sat their mounts next to Angsman who, afoot, swept his glasses once more over the flat. Finally he lowered them and said, more to himself than to the others, "Those Indian women aren't nowhere in sight. They could have moved out in the other direction, or they might be so close we can't see them."

He nodded ahead to where the trail stopped at thick scrub brush and pine and then dipped abruptly to the right to drop to a bench that slanted toward the deepness of the valley. From where they stood, the men saw the trail disappear far below into a denseness of trees and rock.

"Pretty soon the country'll be hugging us tight and we won't see anything," Angsman said. "I don't like it. Not with a hunting party in the neighborhood."

Billy Guay laughed out. "I'll be go to hell! Ed, this old woman's afraid of two squaws! Ed, you hear—"

Ed Hyde wasn't listening. He was staring off in the distance, past the tree tops in the valley to a towering, sand-colored cliff with flying rock buttresses that walled the valley on the other side. He slid from his mount hurriedly, catching his coat on the saddle horn and ripping it where a button held fast. But now he was too excited to heed the ripped coat.

"Look! Yonder to that cliff." His voice broke with excitement. "See that gash near the top, like where there was a rock slide? And look past to the mountains behind!" Angsman and Billy Guay squinted at the distance, but remained silent.

"Dammit!" Hyde screamed. "Don't you see it!" He grabbed his horse's reins and ran, stumbling, down the trail to where it leveled again at the bench. When the others reached him, the map was in his hand and he was laughing a high laugh that didn't seem to belong to the grizzled face. His extended hand held the dirty piece of paper and he kept jabbing at it with a finger of the other hand. "Right there, dammit! Right there!" His pointing finger swept from the map. "Now look at that gold-lovin' rock slide!" His laughter subsided to a self-confident chuckle.

From where they stood on the bench, the towering cliff was now above them and perhaps a mile away over the tops of the trees. A chunk of sandrock as large as a two-story building was gouged from along the smooth surface of the cliff top, with a gravel slide trailing into the valley below; but massive boulders along the cliff top lodged over the depression forming a four-sided opening. It was a gigantic frame through which they could see sky and the flat surface of a mesa in the distance. On both sides, the mesa top fell away to shoulders cutting sharp right angles from the straight vertical lines, then to be cut off there, in their vision, by the rock border of the cliff frame. And before their eyes the mesa turned into a flat-topped Spanish sombrero.

Billy Guay's jaw dropped open. "Damn! It's one of those hats like the Mex dancers wear! Ed, you see it?"

Ed Hyde was busy studying the map. He pointed to it again. "Right on course, Angsman. The flats, the ridge, the valley, the hat." His black-crested fingernail followed wavy lines and circles over the stained paper. "Now we just drop to the valley and followed her up to the end." He shoved the map into his coat pocket and reached up to the saddle horn to mount. "Come on, boys, we're good as rich," he called and swung up into the saddle.

Angsman looked down the slant to the darkness of the trees. "Ed, we got to go slow down there," he tried to caution, but Hyde was urging his mount down the grade and Billy Guay's paint was kicking the loose rock after him. His face tight-

ened as he turned quickly to his horse and then he saw Ygenio Baca leaning against his lead mule vacantly smoking his cigarette. Angsman's face relaxed.

"Ygenio," he said. "Tell your mules to be very quiet."

Ygenio Baca nodded and unhurriedly flicked the cigarette stub down the grade.

They caught up with Hyde and Billy Guay a little way into the timber. The trail had disappeared into a hazy gloom of tangled brush and tree trunks with the cliff on one side and the piney hill on the other to keep out the light.

Angsman rode past them and then stopped and turned in the saddle. Hyde looked a little sheepish because he didn't know where the trail was, but Billy Guay stared back defiantly and tried to look hard.

"Ed, you saw some bones out there on the flats a while back," Angsman said. "Likely they were men who had gold fever." That was all he said. He turned the head of the mare and continued on.

Angsman moved slowly, more cautiously now than before, and every so often he would rein in gently and sit in the saddle without moving, and listen. And there was something about the deep silence that made even Billy Guay strain his eyes into the dimness and not say anything. It was a loud quietness that rang in their ears and seemed unnatural. Moving at this pace, it was almost dusk when they reached the edge of the timber.

The pine hill was still on their left, but higher and steeper. To the right, two spurs reached out from the cliff wall that had gradually dropped until now it was just a hump, but with a confusion of rocky angles in the near distance beyond. And ahead was a canyon mouth, narrow at first, but then appearing to open into a wider area.

As they rode on, Angsman could see it in Ed Hyde's eyes. The map was in his hand and he kept glancing at it and then looking around. When they passed through the canyon mouth into the open, Hyde called, "Angsman, look! Just like it says!"

But Ansman wasn't looking at Ed Hyde. A hundred feet ahead, where a narrow side canyon cut into the arena, the two Indian women sat their ponies and watched the white men approach.

ANGSMAN reined in and waited, looking at them the way you look at deer that you have come across unexpectedly in a forest, waiting for them to bolt. But the women made no move to run. Hyde and Billy Guay drew up next to Angsman, then continued on as Angsman nodged the mare into a walk. They stopped within a few feet of the women who had still neither moved nor uttered a sound.

Angsman dismounted. Hyde stirred restlessly in his saddle before putting his hands on the horn to swing down, but stopped when Billy Guay's hand tightened on his arm.

"Damn, Ed. Look at that young one!" His voice was loud and excited, but as impersonal as if he were making a comment at a girlie show. "She'd even look good in town," he added and threw off to stand in front of her pony.

Angsman looked at Billy Quay and back to the girl who was sliding easily from the bare back of her pony. He greeted her in English, pleasantly, and tipped his hat to the older woman, still mounted, who giggled in a high, thin voice. The girl said nothing, but looked at Angsman.

He said *Como se llama?* and spoke a few more words in Spanish.

The girl's face relaxed slightly and she said, "Sonkadeya," pronouncing each syllable distinctly.

"What the hell's that mean?" Billy Guay said, walking up to her.

"That's her name," Angsman told him, then spoke to the girl again in Spanish.

She replied with a few Spanish phrases, but most of her words were in a dialect of the Apache tongue. She was having trouble combining the two languages so that the

white men could understand her. Her face would frown and she would wipe her hands nervously over the hips of her greasy deerskin dress as she groped for the right words. She was plump and her hair and dress had long gone unwashed, but her face was softly attractive, contrasting oddly with her primitive dress and speech. Her features might have belonged to a white woman—the coloring too, for that matter—but the greased hair and smoke smell that clung to her were decidedly Apache.

When she finished speaking, Angsman looked back at Hyde. "She's a Warm Springs Apache. A Mimbreño," he said. "She says they're on their way home."

Hyde said, "Ask her if she knows about any gold hereabouts."

Angsman looked at him and his eyes opened a little wid . "Maybe you didn't hear, Ed. I said she's a Mimbre. She's going home from a hunting trip led by her father. And her father's Delgadito," he added.

"Hell, the Paches are at peace, ain't they?" Hyde asked indifferently. "What you worried about?"

"Cochise made peace," Angsman answered. "These are Mimbres, not Chiricahuas and their chief is Victorio. He's never never made peace. I don't want to scare you, Ed," he said looking back to the girl, "but his war lieutenant's Delgadito."

Billy Guay was standing in front of the girl, his thumbs in his gun belts, looking at her closely. "I know how to stop a war," he said smiling.

"Who's talkin' about war?" Hyde asked. "We're not startin' anything."

"You don't have to stop it, Ed," Angsman said. "You think about finishing it. And you think about your life."

"Don't worry about me thinkin' about my life. I think about it bein' almost gone and not worth a Dixie single. Hell yes we're takin' a chance!" Hyde argued. "If gold was easy to come by, it wouldn't be worth nothin'."

"I still know how to stop a war," Billy Guay said idly.

Hyde looked at him impatiently. "What's that talk supposed to mean?" Then he saw how Billy Guay was looking at the girl, and the frown eased off the grizzled face as it dawned on him what Billy Guay was thinking about, and he rubbed his beard.

"You see what I mean, Ed," Billy Guay said smiling. "We take Miss Indin along and ain't no Delgadito or even U.S. Grant goin' to stop us." He looked up at the old woman on the pony. "Though I don't see any reason for carryin' excess baggage."

Angsman caught him by both arms and spun him around. "You gun-crazy kid, you out of your mind! You don't wave threats at Apaches!" He pushed the boy away roughly. "Just stop a minute, Ed. You got better sense than what this boy's proposing."

"It's worth a chance, Angsman. Any chance. We're not stoppin' after comin' this far on account of some Indin or his little girl," Hyde said. "I'd say Billy's got the right idea. I told you he had nerve. Let him use a little of it."

Billy Guay looked toward Angsman's mount and saw his handgun in a saddle holster, then both pistols came out and he pointed them at the scout.

"Don't talk again Angsman, cause if I hear any more abuse I'll shoot you as quick as this." He raised a pistol and swung it to the side as if without aiming and pulled the trigger. The old Indian woman dropped from the pony without a cry.

There was silence. Hyde looked at him, stunned. "God, Billy! You didn't have to do that!"

Billy Guay laughed, but the laugh trailed off too quickly, as if he just then realized what he had done. He forced the laugh now, and said, "Hell, Ed. She was only an Indin. What you fussin' about?"

Hyde said, "Well, it's done now and can't be undone." But he looked about nervously as if expecting a simple solution to be

standing near at hand. A solution or some kind of justification. He saw the mining equipment packed on one of the mules and the look of distress left his eyes. "Let's quit talkin' about it," he said. "We got things to do."

Billy Guay blew down the barrel of the pistol he had fired and watched Sonkadeya as she bent over the women momentarily, then rose without the trace of an emotion on her face. It puzzled Billy Guay and made him more nervous. He waved a pistol toward Ygenio Baca. "Hey, mozo! Get a shovel and turn this old woman under. No sense in havin' the birds tellin' on us."

THE scout rode in silence, knowing what would come, but not knowing when. His gaze crawled over the wildness of the slanting canyon walls, brush trees and scattered boulders, where nothing moved. The left wall was dark, the shadowy rock outlines obscure and blending into each other; the opposite slope was hazy and cold in the dim light of the late sun. He felt the tenseness all over his body. The feeling of knowing that something is close though you can't see it or hear it. Only the quietness, the metallic clop of hoofs, then Billy Guay's loud, forced laughter that would cut the stillness and hang there in the narrowness until it faded out up canyon. Angsman knew the feeling. It went with campaigning. But this time there was a difference. It was the first time he had ever led into a canyon with such a strong premonition that Apaches were present. Yet, with the feeling, he recognized an eager expectancy. Perhaps fatalism, he thought.

He watched two chicken hawks dodging, gliding in and out, drop toward a brush tree half-way up the slanting right wall, then, just as they were about to land in the bush, they rose quickly and soared out of sight. Now he was more than sure. They were riding into an ambush. And there was so little time to do anything about it.

He glanced at Hyde riding next to him. Hyde couldn't be kept back now. The final circle on his map was just a little figuring from the end of the canyon.

"Slow her down, Ed," Billy Quay yelled. "I can't propose to Miss Indin and canter at the same time." He laughed and reached over to put his hand on Sonkadeya's hip, then let the hand fall to her knee.

He called out, "Yes sir, Ed. I think we made us a good move."

Sonkadeya did not resist. Her head nodded faintly with the sway of her pony, looking straight ahead. But her eyes moved from one canyon wall to the other and there was the slightest gleam of a smile.

Billy Guay

Angsman wondered if he really cared what was going to happen. He didn't care about Hyde or Billy Guay; and he didn't know Ygenio Baca well enough to have a feeling one way or the other. From the beginning, Ygenio had been taking a chance like everyone else. He thought of his own life and the odd fact occurred to him that he didn't even particularly care about himself. He tried to picture death in relation to himself, but he would see himself lying on the ground and himself looking at the body and knew that couldn't be so. He thought of how hard it was to take yourself out of the picture to see yourself dead, and ended up with: *If you're not going to be there to worry about yourself being dead, why worry at all?* But you don't stay alive not caring, and his eyes went back to the canyon sides.

He watched Hyde engrossed in his map

and looked back at Billy Guay riding close to Sonkadeya with his hand on her leg. They could be shot from their saddles and not even see where it came from. Or, they could be taken by surprise. His head swung front again and he saw the canyon up ahead narrow to less than fifty feet across. Or they could be taken by surprise!

He flicked the rein against the mare's mane, gently, to ease her toward the right canyon wall. He made the move slowly, leading the others at a very slight angle, so that Hyde and Billy Guay, in their preoccupation, did not even notice the edging. Either to be shot in the head or not at all, Angsman thought.

Now they were riding much closer to the slanting canyon wall. He turned in the saddle to watch Billy Guay still laughing and moving his hand over Sonkadeya. And when he turned back he saw the half dozen Apaches standing in the trail not a dozen yards ahead. It was funny because he was looking at half-naked, armed Apaches and he could still hear Billy Guay's laughter coming from behind.

Then the laughter stopped. Hyde groaned, "Oh my God!" and in the instant spurred his mount and yanked rein to wheel off to the left. There was the report of a heavy rifle and horse and rider went down.

Angsman's arms were jerked suddenly behind his back and he saw three Apaches race for the fallen Hyde as he felt himself dragged over the rump of the mare. He landed on his feet and staggered and watched one warrior dragging Hyde back toward them by one leg. Hyde was screaming, holding onto the other leg that was bouncing over the rough ground.

Billy Guay had jerked his arms free and stood a little part from the dozen Apaches aiming bows and carbines at him. His hands were on the pistol butts with fear and indecision plain on his face.

Angsman twisted his neck toward him. "Don't even think about it, boy. You don't have a chance." It was all over in something like fifteen seconds.

Hyde was writhing on the ground, groaning and holding onto the hole in his thigh where the heavy slug had gone through to take the horse in the belly. Angsman stooped to look at the wound and saw that Hyde was holding the map, pressed tight to his leg and now smeared with blood. He looked up and Delgadito was standing on the other side of the wounded man. Next to him stood Sonkadeya.

–

DELGADITO was not dressed for war. He wore a faded, red cotton shirt, buttonless and held down by the cartridge belt around his waist; and his thin face looked almost ridiculous under the shabby, wide-brimmed hat that sat straight on the top of his head, at least two sizes too small. But Angsman did not laugh. He knew Delgadito, Victorio's war lieutenant, and probably the most capable hit and run guerilla leader in Apacheria. No, Angsman did not laugh.

Delgadito stared at them, taking his time to look around, then said, "Hello, Angsmon. You have a cigarillo?"

Angsman fished in his shirt pocket and drew out tobacco and paper and handed it to the Indian. Delgadito rolled a cigarette awkwardly and handed the sack to Angsman who rolled himself one then flicked a match with his thumbnail and lighted the cigarettes. Both men drew deeply and smoked in silence. Finally, Angsman said, "It is good to smoke with you again, Sheekasay."

Delgadito nodded his head and Angsman went on, "It has been five years since we smoked together at San Carlos."

The Apache shook his head slightly. "Together we have smoked other things since then, Angs-mon," and added a few words in the Mimbre dialect.

Angsman looked at him quickly. "You were at Big Dry Wash?"

Delgadito smiled for the first time and nodded his head. "How is your sickness, Angs-mon?" he asked, and the smile broadened.

Angsman's hand came up quickly to his side where the bullet had torn through that day two years before at Dry Wash, and now he smiled.

Delgadito watched him with the nearest an Apache comes to giving an admiring look. He said, "You are a big man, Angsmon. I like to fight you. But now you do something very foolish and I must stop you. I mean you no harm, Angs-mon, for I like to fight you, but now you must go home and stop this foolish and take this old man before the smell enters his leg. And Angs-mon, tell this old man what befalls him if he returns. Tell him the medicine he carries in his hand is false. Show him how he cannot read the medicine ever again because of his own blood." For a moment his eyes lifted to the heights of the canyon wall. "Maybeso that is the only way, Angs-mon. With blood."

Angsman offered no thanks for their freedom. Gratitude was not an Apache custom, but he said, "On the way home, I will impress your words on them."

"Tell my words to the old man," Delgadiot replied, then his voice became cold. "I will tell the young one." And he looked toward Billy Guay.

Angsman swallowed hard to remain impassive. "There is nothing I can say."

"The mother of Sonkadeya speaks in my ear, Angsmon. What could you say?" Delgadito turned deliberately and walked away.

Angsman rode without speaking, listening to Hyde's groans as the saddle rubbed the open rawness of his wound. The groans were beginning to erase the scream that hung in his mind and repeated over and over. Billy Guay's scream as they carried him up canyon.

Angsman knew what he was going to do. He'd still have his worn saddle and old model carbine, but he knew what he was going to do. Hyde's leg would heal and he'd be back the next year, or the year after; or if not him, someone else. The Southwest was full of Hydes. And as long as there were Hydes, there were Billy Guays. Big talkers with big guns who ended up lying dead, after a while, in a Mimbre rancheria. Angsman would go back to Fort Bowie. Even if it got slow sometimes, there'd always be plenty to do. ###

Even for the marshal of a quick-trigger town like Llanos. Tad Shafter was either too courageous to be human—or too much of a reckless madman to be a peace officer. What was the deadly secret of—

THE MAN FROM HELL!

By George C. Appell

Featured in the action-packed September issue along with yarns by top-notchers like Robert L. Trimnell and T. C. McClary, *plus* a terrific Max Brand Classic, "Dust Storm." On sale now! Don't miss it!

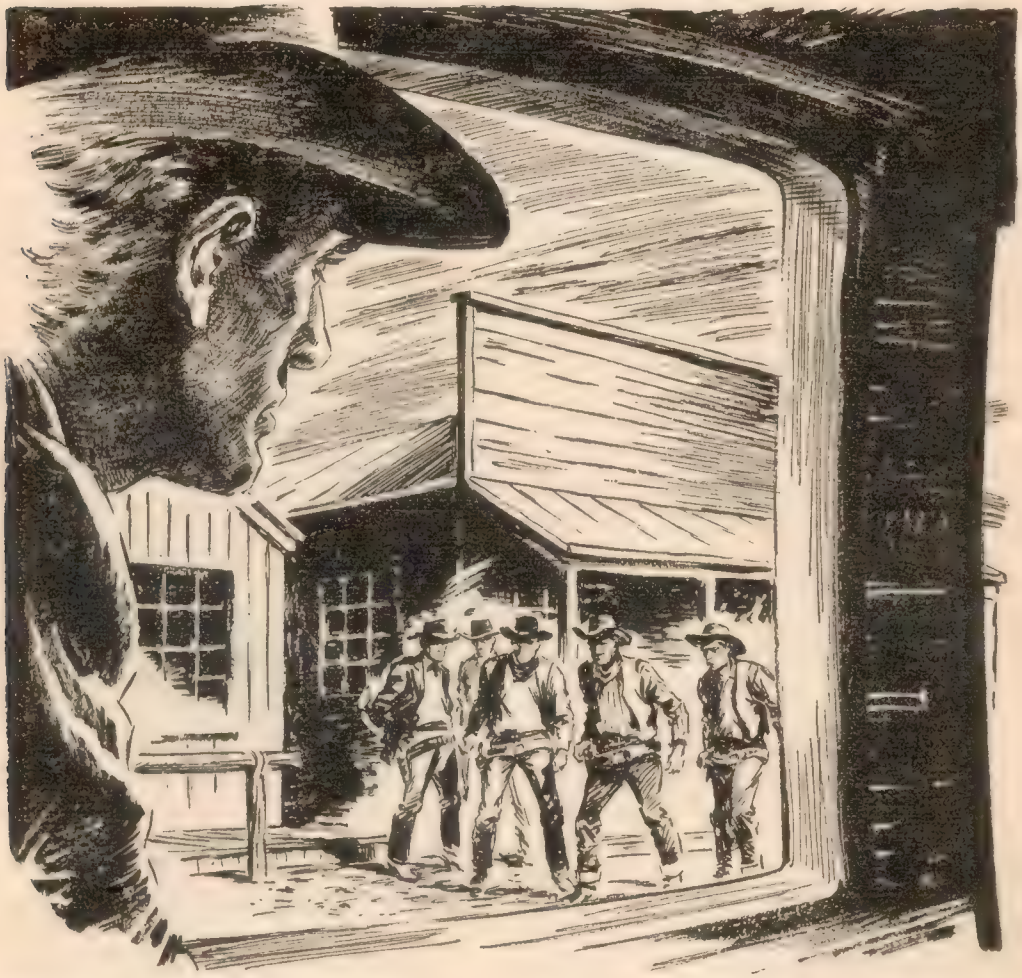
MAX BRAND'S 25c

WESTERN

MAGAZINE

Swearing he'd return someday and kill them all, he'd ridden into the night. Now, he was on the stage, headed home, to keep his promise to α . . .

GUNSMOKE TOWN



There was no more talk. The men edged forward, breathing like a single animal. . . .

By

C. HALL

THOMPSON

WE LOOKED up at the white bell tower. Red late sun made rainbow lights on Ma Purdee's stained-glass window.

"Well, she's finished," I said.

Sheriff Carmody grinned under his pale mustache.

It was a church the folks of Tucumcari could point to with pride. Three years in

the building and solid oak pews and a pipe-organ clear from Philadelphia. The afternoon air was warm and good to breathe.

I said, "All she needs is the new Parson."

"And she'll have that, come nightfall."

The excitement was all through town. The ladies had a whopping big supper fixed up at the Granger's Hall and the menfolk were rigged out in Sunday-best, though it was only Wednesday. Nobody knew much about the new Parson—not even his name. But, we knew, he'd be coming in on the sundown stage.

We turned into Lincoln Street. Full skirts were whipping up dust down by the Freight Station. Men smoked and talked, watching the far-east turn of the Stage Road. Carmody grinned wider.

"Ain't a soul in Tucumcari but's on the Parson's reception committee."

We laughed, feeling fine.

Then, the deputy waved from the doorway of the Sheriff's Office.

Carmody frowned. "What's he so het up about?"

The deputy crossed to us at a run. "Young Jo Ford's on his way to town."

Carmody bit his cigar. "You sure?"

I edged closer. It smelled like a story.

The deputy nodded. "Lafe Potter just rid in. Passed the stage on his way. Caught a wink of this fella in black. Swears it was Ford."

"Ford." The Sheriff glanced upstreet at the waiting crowd. "On the stage."

"The same stage as the new Parson."

I said, "What is this?"

"We're liable to lose our Parson," Carmody said. "He's like to be robbed and gunned before we even meet him."

"By this Ford?"

Carmody dropped his cigar in the dust.

"Round up some men," he told the deputy. "I want them at my office."

The deputy ran off.

Pale eyes searched the stretching purple shadows of the east hills. The Sheriff swore.

I said, "Looks like the nature of that reception committee's going to change."

"We'll be waiting for young Mister Ford."

ALL Carmody said was, "Jo Ford's on that stage."

Women hustled the kids indoors. Men went home and came back with cartridge-belts strapped in place. A stray mongrel scooted across the empty street. It seemed colder, now the sun was nearly gone.

I stood with Carmody under the arcade outside the Sheriff's Office. Behind us, men crowded in the tiny room, waiting without talk. I said, "Just who is he, Sheriff?"

Carmody gnawed his mustache.

"That's right," he said. "The Ford business was before your time."

"Before I bought the *Epitaph*?"

He nodded. "But, I reckon you'll find the story in your old news files. Ten years ago. Widower named Ulysses Ford lived here with his son Jo. Kid was about fifteen, then. Watched us hang his Pa for stage-robbery and murder. Same night, the kid lit out. But he swore he'd be back one day—to settle the score."

A light wind fluttered in the blue dust.

"And today's the day," I said.

Carmody's mouth was a line cut in stone. "Like father, like son."

It grated on me. "You can't be sure."

"I know men like the Fords. They never forget."

"The kid could've changed."

Carmody made a short laugh. He was the Sheriff, now. He was the hard man with the pale eyes that had seen too many killers with nervous guns, too many cottonmouths that never changed their skins.

"He was raised by 'Lyss Ford. The old man was rotten, Ben. Made the kid promise he'd come back and shoot this town to hell. The kid promised."

"He could grow up. He could see his

Pa was wrong. He could turn the other way—"

"It sounds pretty," Carmody said. "It sounds sweet."

"It could happen."

He looked at me hard. "I tell you Ben, when a boy's got bad blood, there's only one thing that changes him. . . ."

A broad fist curled on the gunbutt.

I turned away. I looked at the white spire, cool and tall above the cottonwood branches. I thought of words like charity and forbearance. My mouth had a bitter taste.

"Building that church didn't do much good, did it, Sheriff?"

He went stiff. "Now, listen, Ben—"

In the doorway, a deputy said, "Here she comes."

There was no more talk. I felt the men edge forward, breathing like a single animal. I heard the slow cocking of hammers, like the crackle of wildfire in dry brush. Carmody stood motionless, eyes fixed on the Freight Office across the street.

The stage rocked on leather springs and the footbrake screeched and the Freightmaster came out, slow and careful. The driver legged down and pulled open the door.

Carmody's gunhand was white.

I said, "Sheriff, listen—"

"Shut up."

PASSENGERS stepped down, slapping alkali dust from their clothes; a lady in gray, an Army officer, a drummer with a hard brown derby. The Parson came last, thin and high in his dark suit and white clerical collar. Their faces were blurred in the dusk.

Carmody frowned. He waited.

Nobody else climbed down.

"Lafe made a mistake," the deputy whispered.

"Or Ford dropped off before the stage rolled in."

Stiff and slow, Carmody went down the steps and across the road. The driver was working with his team.

Carmody said, "That's your full load?"

The driver nodded.

"You sure—"

"Good evening, Sheriff."

I saw Carmody twist to face the Parson Behind me, men pushed forward, peering.

I didn't hear the rest of the talk. The Parson and Carmody spoke quiet-like. In the end, they crossed to the Sheriff's Office. Carmody was saying, "We'd figured on a bigger reception committee."

The Parson smiled. He was young. I liked his steady eyes. The men under the arcade stared and let out a long sigh. Carmody didn't look at me.

"Men, I reckon you better tell the womenfolks to get that supper going."

The party broke up, muttering; a laugh sounded here and there; a granger scratched his ear and said, "Well, I'll be dogged."

Carmody turned a slow smile on me. It was sheepish, but wide.

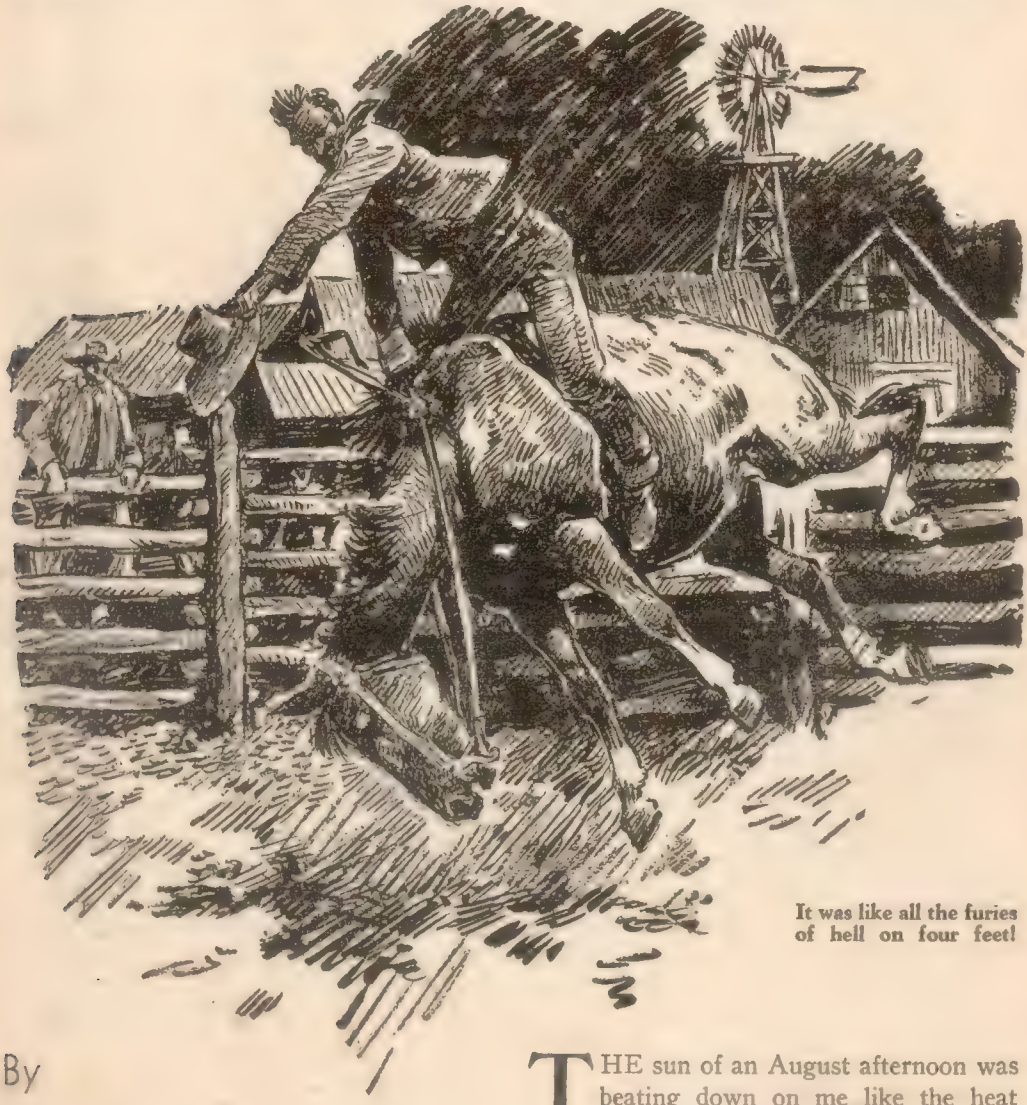
"Like to take a walk with us, Ben? I want to show the new church to Parson Ford." ✱ ✱ ✱

SITTIN' PRETTY

Fred H. McConnell, of Pueblo, Colorado, who has been making saddles for 50 years says: "I have never seen a woman who is more particular about her clothing than a cowboy is about his saddle." In this machine era, a saddle is one thing still made nearly entirely by hand.

Helfer

RIDE THE RED KILLER!



It was like all the furies of hell on four feet!

By

N. E. SNOKE

When the red hell rose up inside me, I needed an ax, a sledge hammer—anything to pound and smash and slash with. . . .

THE sun of an August afternoon was beating down on me like the heat rays from hell. The dust from the road came up in little brown puffs from under my horse's feet, my nose and throat and eyes were burning from it, and the weeds beside the road were covered with a film of it. . . .

The only splashes of color were the darting lizards, bright green, crimson and deep purple ones, and sometimes the slick gray of a rattler.

The only sounds were the clip-clop of Jane-Baby's iron-shod feet, and now and then the shrill scream of a bluejay from the trees beside the bayou a quarter of a mile away, or the splash of a gar as it leaped and turned in the water.

The dank odor from the bayou and the sweat from the horse under me, were the only smells—yet inside my head were a thousand sights and sounds—and smells.

Jane-Baby was a Missouri-bred bay mare. I'd rode her mother, Lady Jane, in a great arena in New York. I'd tamed and trained her until both of us were fairly well-known. We were a drawing card at every big rodeo in the country.

Now, all I had was the horse under me, the clothes on my back, and a few more rolled up in an old fatigue jacket tied on my saddle behind me—and of course, my roll of "tools," each in its own little canvas compartment. Along with the memory of sixteen months spent across the water, on one island after another, ending up on Okinawa; then the trip home by plane, and ten long months in a V. A. hospital.

Then I'd gone home for a visit and seen Jane-Baby for the first time. She had been born while I was overseas. My kid brother had broken her to the saddle for me, but there was enough wickedness left in her eyes, for me to admire her. She would do for a starter!

After three weeks in the quiet of the country, on my folks' farm, I'd thought I was going nuts. So me and Jane-Baby had started out on the road.

I knew of a ranch in Texas, about eighty miles out from big D. I'd been there once with a buyer for a big rodeo outfit. I knew Jeff Stanley would never recognize me now as Big Jim McCloud, the rodeo star.

By four o'clock in the afternoon I was nearing the highway that passed Jeff's ranch. I could hear the cars whizzing past on the paved road long before I could see them—like the hiss of a copperhead about to strike. There was a sharp turn in the road, and me and Jane-Baby were in a different world.

The noise of the cars and trucks speeding past us unnerved me though, and I decided to get off the highway and ride through the woods, instead. I didn't want quiet, understand—but I didn't want the noise right on top of me either.

After a while I heard the sound of someone chopping wood, but when I reached the place where the sound had come from, no one was there. I saw an old Negro walking through the woods with a double-arm load of stove wood. The ax was leaning against a big pile of wood yet to be chopped and split into sticks. I put the ax out of sight—then went back to the road.

DUSK was closing in when I reached the ranch. I rode up to a cowboy leaning on the front corral gate.

"Where'll I find Jeff Stanley?" I inquired.

"Over there," he answered, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb towards several men leaning on a fence, on the other side of which was a reddish-brown horse. A violent-looking animal.

The cowboy swung the gate open and me and Jane-Baby went through it. The man turned as I rode up to them, and I picked out Jeff Stanley at a glance. They eyed my weary horse and myself, dusty and sweat-streaked. They admired Jane-Baby's long clean lines, every man of them. I could see it in their faces. Even the big stallion came closer to the bars of the corral.

"Light, cowboy, and let your saddle cool off," Jeff invited.

"I'm looking for a job," I said, keeping my seat.

"What can you do?"

"Anything you want done—for two hundred bucks a month and keep," I heard myself saying.

"Two hundred—! Ain't no cowboy worth that much money!"

"I am," I said calmly. I had my wrists crossed in front of me holding the reins in my left hand. Resting on the saddlehorn I leaned forward and stared at him.

"I am, of any man's money!" I repeated.

Jeff couldn't pull his eyes away from mine. "Have I seen you somewhere before?" he asked.

"You could have—I been around." A puff of wind lifted my hat. He continued to stare, and I felt a deep quivering in my chest and almost prayed that he wouldn't recognize me. But how the hell could he? This thin, hard-faced man before him—a hundred and forty pounds scattered over six feet of bones, and muscle. They'd made me exercise, thank God. I was tough and looked tough, like old boot leather.

Jeff kept staring at my narrow forehead and face, straight dark hair and long straight black eyebrows—as typical of the McClouds of Missouri as levis are on a cowboy.

"Seems like I've seen you somers'," he repeated. He looked at the men with him—they shook their heads.

"Never been in these parts before, Jeff," one of them said.

"Do I get a job, or do I move on?"

"Well now, two hundred bucks a month and keep! Git down off your horse and bunk here tonight—rest yourself and your horse. Tomorrow we might both see things differently."

"I stay permanent, or I don't stay!"

"I think we could get along all right," he said, meeting my eyes again. "But that two hundred bucks a month—!"

"If he could tame this here stallion—this red hellion, he'd be worth it now!" one of the men laughed, then they all laughed and looked me over.

"I can do it, given a little time!" I said, and clenched my teeth together so hard my ears stopped up, and I couldn't hear what they were saying.

"Give him a chance, Jeff," someone laughed.

"Not at two hundred bucks a month!" he answered.

"Tell you what I'll do," I said. "If I don't tame him, I'll give *you* two hundred bucks at the end of the month!"

"Have you got two hundred bucks, cowboy?" Jeff asked.

"I've got it—but not on me."

"It's a deal. Where you from, and what's your name?"

"Missouri," I answered. "And the name's—Mac."

"You'll bunk over there Mac." He pointed toward a long low building that I already knew was the bunkhouse.

"Turn your mare loose in that corral—the boys over there will take care of her. You both look all in," he added.

I sat up straighter in my saddle—now would come the test! Feeling as though I was made of iron, I turned Jane-Baby and rode over to the fence before I dismounted.

I had my back turned to Jeff Stanley, but I heard him gasp.

"Mygawd!" he said in a choking voice. "I've done hired myself a one-handed Missouri cowboy—at two hundred bucks a month!"

I GAVE no sign that I'd heard him.

"No, Jeff. You'll be makin' yourself two hundred bucks," a voice answered him.

"I'll be damned if he will!" I muttered to myself through clenched teeth.

I felt a fire raging in my belly, and it blazed up and cut off my breath for a second. "This is it, McCloud," I told myself, and leaned my head against Jane-Baby's flank in weariness.

No one said anything to me at chow-time. And later in the bunkhouse they tried to ignore the sleeve of my shirt buttoned over the stub of my wrist. They felt that I had put something over on Jeff Stanley.

"Okay, cowboys," I said finally. "Jeff'll be glad to pay me two hundred bucks at the end of the month. Anyhow, the agreement is between me and Jeff. Don't you

think he can take care of his own business? Jist you keep outa my way, and I'll not git in yours!"

"But what can you do, feller, with one hand—to earn two hundred bucks?" someone asked.

"If I don't earn it I won't get it. You all know Jeff well enough to know that!" I replied.

"You're right!" a tall cowboy spoke up. "Nobody don't put nothin' over on Jeff!"

There was nothing more to say, so I stripped off my dusty clothes and lay down on my bunk. Turning my face to the wall, I went to sleep at once.

I awoke about midnight, when everything was dark and quiet. A breeze was coming through the window and was fairly cool.

The stub of my right arm was torturing me! I tried rubbing it and pounding it against the bottom of my bunk—pains were shooting up to my shoulder and a terrible, uncontrollable itching took hold of it! The hair on my head was plastered to my scalp with sweat, and the breath was coming from my lungs in spurts.

I knew there was only one thing to do! I reached under my pillow for the small canvas roll. I'd tried to slip it under there without being seen when I'd come in—I was still sensitive—but I'd looked up to see two cowhands eyeing the khaki-colored canvas roll with suspicion. Whatever they thought, I didn't care! I had to keep it close to me, where I could put my fingers on it and snatch it up and run out into the night with it!

I reached for my boots and levis with my left hand, and in my shorts—with the canvas roll clamped tightly in the crook of my right elbow, I ran out of the building.

As I ran past the corral where the stallion was—I had named him Red Hellion in my own mind—he made a sound like a bronx cheer.

"I'll attend to you, you red devil! But not tonight! Not when I'm like this." I muttered. "It'll be between the two of us. I'll either be your master or a bloody mass of pulp and bones!"

I stopped long enough to shove my feet into my boots, but still carried my levis in my hand—I knew the spot I was headed for. It was about a mile up the road and a quarter mile back among the trees.

The briars and weeds slapped against my bare legs, bruising and tearing the skin, but it made me feel good. My stub didn't hurt so damnable.

I was winded when I reached the place where I'd hid the ax. I dropped down on a log and put the canvas roll under my foot to hold it steady, while I jerked the snaps open with shaking fingers and fumbled for the thing I meant to use.

Old Doc, at the hospital, had warned me what to expect in my particular case—and advised me what to do about it. He'd had the "tools" made especially for my needs. I selected the one I wanted. It had a peculiar twist to it. I jerked the button off my sleeve in my haste to shove it on. It took me only a second to fit the groove into the apparatus Old Doc had fitted to the end of my stub.

I grasped the ax handle and shoved it into the twisted hook, then tested it. It was as solid as a vise. I went to work on that woodpile, and chopped for three solid hours before the pain left me.

With my left hand I released the ax handle and stood there shaking from head to foot. I looked down at my shorts. They were dripping with sweat and sticking to my body. My legs were bloody and discolored. The sight of the long, hairy, sorry-looking things, ending in the fancy boots, made me grin. Then I chuckled, and finally threw back my head and roared with laughter—and why not? Hadn't I beaten the devil again? Those pains used to last for *days* at a time!

I left the woodpile, still carrying my levis and tools in my hand. I went to a little

stream of water I had splashed through earlier, I lay down in it and wallowed like an animal. Then I rubbed myself down and put on my levis. I was exhausted but calm.

I walked back toward the bunkhouse slowly. The stallion loped toward the fence and stopped ten feet away. A streak of moonlight came from somewhere and shone full in his face.

I closed my eyes and shook my head hard, from side to side.

"I'll attend to you!" I told him. "We'll see who is boss! It'll be fair and square though, not when I'm ridden by this—this devil!"

OLD DOC had talked to me a long time before he discharged me. "Son," he'd said, "You've lost one little piece of your body, and you're acting up something awful! I know the pain is bad—with that rotten bone! But it'll pass. What you have got to do first is prove yourself a man."

"How, Doc, how?" I had begged.

"By never taking your pain out on man nor beast! Never hurt any living thing—chop wood, pound rocks, hammer steel, but never hurt a living thing! When you can do that—you're a man! You'll feel alive again."

I was trying hard to live up to that.

When I reached the bunkhouse the men were getting that last full hour of sleep, just before roll-out time. I slipped into my bunk without disturbing anyone.

The old cook was poking at me with the broom handle, at nine-thirty the next morning when I awakened.

"Shore a fine way to earn two hunnerd bucks a month, boss," he said, grinning.

"Yeah! and I guess I'm too late for breakfast too." I said, as I yawned and rolled out.

"No suh, coffee pots on back of the stove —keepin' hot, eggs and bacon on the table, too," he said.

I was surprised, even when I saw the big cord of freshly-chopped wood. He'd have no way of knowing I was the one who chopped it!

The cook didn't come to the kitchen, but I helped myself to the food, then went outside again.

I noticed the sky had a peculiar haze to it. The very air, way up high, had a smoky blue tint to it. Not a blade of grass or a tree leaf was moving. The cattle and horses were standing quietly huddled together, not grazing—just huddled together.

I saw the Negro and a white man standing at the door of a shed talking, and examining something. I walked over to them. They had the ax between them and were examining the marks on the handle. I pretended that I saw nothing unusual.

"Is a storm coming up?" I asked the old cook.

"Yes suh! A real Texas hurricane, I hear tell," the Negro answered.

The white man lifted his head and his eyes, and stared at me. Then at the end of my sleeve. I felt my face changing color and turned and walked away.

As the day wore on, the sky took on a brassy look. There seemed to be a feeling of subdued excitement everywhere. The man were boarding up the windows, and anchoring the small buildings with strong rope and wire. The stock huddled more closely together—even the chickens massed themselves together close to the door of the chicken house, as if ready to dart inside at the first puff of wind.

By evening the nerves of my arm had begun twitching and jerking again. "Hells bells, what'll I do now?" I gritted.

The axe was gone. If I could only find a sledge hammer or something to pound with! The hard steady vibration, was all that seemed to give me relief.

I rushed out of the bunkhouse to look for something—but every loose piece of equipment had been put away. Every building had been locked up in preparation for the hurricane—and me with a hurricane raging inside of me!

IT GREW dark suddenly. I was pacing up and down, back and forth, behind the bunkhouse; the canvas roll of tools in my pocket—pounding the stub of my arm in the palm of my left hand when I heard a sound.

"Boss?" someone called softly, out of the darkness.

"No. It's me, Mac," I answered.

"You're wanted!" I could see the shape of his body, and knew it was the Negro cook. *What the hell can Jeff want with me now?* I wondered.

"I *can't* come—now." I said, from between clenched teeth.

"You gotta come—now, suh!" He came and clutched me by the arm, and pushed me ahead of him around the corner of the bunk house. He pointed to a shed with a light inside the window.

It was the building where he had been talking with the white man-about the ax handle—I had since learned that it was the blacksmith shope . . . *the blacksmith shop!* There would be hammers, sledges, even axes in there! I was desperate with pain. I fastened the tool to the stub of my arm as I ran to the shed, and shoved open the door.

The same white man was there, calmly working on a set of harness. He arose quickly and took a step toward me, he snatched up a heavy hammer and thrust it toward me.

"Here Mac, get to work on that anvil now!" he commanded.

I met his eyes for a second. I'd heard a peculiar sound as he'd taken that step toward me. I glanced at his feet—on one was a worn old shoe, the other was smooth and shiny—a metal foot! When I looked up again he grinned and slapped his thigh with his open hand. "First war," he said. He motioned toward the anvil and a long flat piece of iron.

"Now beat the devil outa that wagon shaft," he said.

"Sh-o-oo-sh!" he said to the cook, and motioned toward the door. "Git going now, Moe, and bring us a pot of coffee. We may have to work here a long time tonight."

"Thanks—sir." I said, after the cook had left.

In the next two and a half hours, I pounded, straightened or bent, every piece of metal in that shop. No words were spoken between us until I was ready to stop.

"You're a handy feller to have around," he remarked. "Here." He tossed me a piece of metal. I caught it in my left hand and saw that it was a key.

"Come in here whenever you feel like it," he invited. "I'll put that stuff that *needs* to be done over there." He pointed to one side of the shed—then waved his hand around. "The rest you can practice on," he grinned.

"Moe thanks you for the wood. He has two boys growin' up—be just about right for another war. Always remember, son, men with black skins fight just as good as men with white!" he added grimly.

I went out into the night knowing I'd found a couple of friends—it was a good feeling. It was beginning to rain and the wind had come up. Neither of us in the old shed had noticed it, though.

Every man in the bunkhouse was restless, while I felt unusually calm. They walked aimlessly about, looking out first one door than another, with no thought of going to bed.

I crawled into my bunk. The hurricane grew worse—I could hear it in my sleep, but the thunder and lightning, and the tearing wind, were not really thunder, lightning and wind—they were the hell of war all over again.

My head throbbed with the sound of bursting shells and the flares from them. The rain blowing against the wall of the bunkhouse, was the rain and the mud of the foxholes.

The red stallion's face was not the face of a horse in my half-dream, but the face of one of the conquered—a prisoner to be

taken—but one that must not be wounded or killed!

When I awoke my head cleared instantly, and I felt strong and wide awake. I rolled out and reached for my levis and my boots . . .

"Where the hell do you think you're goin', Mac?" someone asked.

"I think this would be a good time to tame that stallion, and earn my two hundred bucks," I replied.

"My God, that stallion'll kill you! He's already scared half to death!"

"So am I. But it's now or never. If I can get a saddle on him, I'll tame him—if not, I'll take him barehanded and see who wins!"

Somebody leaped for the telephone—but it was dead.

"Go call Jeff and stop this crazy fool!" he shouted.

I put the canvas roll in my pocket and walked out.

THE cowboy ran toward the house to get Jeff Stanley. Some of the others were getting into their slickers and cussing me.

As I walked toward the stables, I fastened the tool that was built like a claw hammer—the one with a slit in it, making two curved, blunt prongs—onto the stub of my arm. And it seemed that with no strength at all, I wrenched the fastener off the stallion's stall.

"Come on out, you red devil!" I called softly. For an answer, it sounded like he was tearing the stall apart with his hind feet!

I knew that with the first flash of lightning, when he could see the open door, he'd be out of there like a streak—but I'd be ready for him.

I took a rope from the wall and hitched it around a post, then stood by the door with the lasso in my hand. Kicking the door open again, I waited.

A clap of thunder, a flash of lightning—and a streak of fury! I was afraid he'd broken his neck when he reached the end of the rope, but I was on him instantly with the bridle, and had the bit between his teeth while he was still gasping for air.

Then he was on his feet with me on his back! I'd jerked the lasso off his neck as he staggered to his feet—

It was like all the furies of hell on four feet! And me on top of it without even a saddle—I hadn't even thought of one!

I saw lights coming toward us from three directions, and wondered why they were bobbing up and down at such a terrific pace, then realized it was us—me and Red Hellion, that was goin' up and down!

Such an overwhelming feeling of power! I never doubted but what I'd be the master. I threw back my head and yelled. I'd made a hard knot in the reins and had it through the slot in the claw—those reins would never come loose until they were loosened by hand, until I was master or a beaten mass of flesh and bone! That was the way I wanted it. It was a fight to the finish!

I flailed him with my left hand, and dug in with my boot heels. I yelled defiance to man and the elements. The hurricane was a mere blow. The thunder, the lightning, the wind and the big red stallion—and me—were as one!

The universe belonged to Red Hellion and me! And I was going to conquer . . . I wasn't going to set back and die from inaction and boredom! Excitement—action—speed! Any damn thing to keep from thinking!

Finally the battle was over. Me and Red Hellion walked twice around the corral side by side—then back to the stable.

The fence was lined with cowboys. The hurricane had tapered off, but nobody had noticed it.

Jeff Stanley walked up to me and pointed his forefinger in my face. "I know you now!" he said. We looked at each other steadily.

(Continued on page 113)

NO TOWN FOR A TINHORN

They'd jerked out Rideaway Jack Belden's life at the end of a stretch of hemp, and now his two sons were standing back to back, handing out a sixgun challenge to the law on one side, and to the owlhoot on the other!

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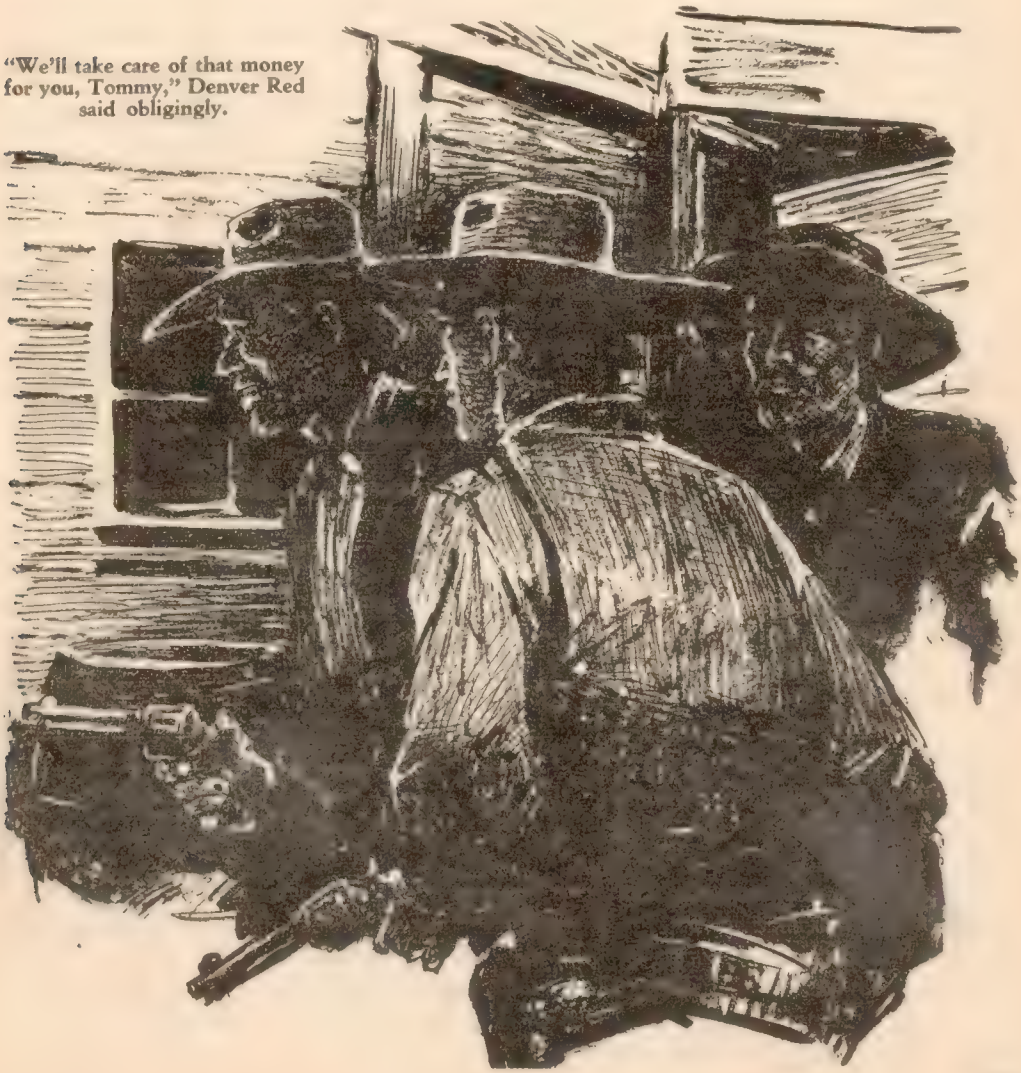
By DANE GREGORY

CHAPTER ONE

Boothill Bet

TOMMY BELDEN didn't go in right away. He gave the door panel an easy nudge, held it open, and then flattened one slim, newly-callused palm on the frame, leaning his weight against it in an attitude of elaborate indifference. He said dryly, "Hello the crowd," and laid a level gray stare on the three occupants of the Lowhi Palace's private, inner office.

There were varying reactions to this. Against the flat, hard light of a gas lamp, Tommy's brother Walt, owner of the gambling place, turned slowly from his desk. He said, "Why, hello kid! I didn't know you were coming, or I'd have rolled out the new plush carpet."



"We'll take care of that money for you, Tommy," Denver Red said obligingly.

Walt's girl Madge rose to her feet in a single surge of movement, the gaslight tangling in her whiskey-colored hair. She said, "Tommy! Tommy!" and gave him a hand that felt incredibly small and soft in his own work-roughened palm.

And Madge's father crossed gaitered shanks and munched at the stem of his pipe, studying the kid with a bright curiosity. Pop Oliphant said: "How are you, son—and what you been doing with yourself?"

The kid didn't answer. He crossed the room and laid a wad of currency down on Walt's desk. "Eighty dollars," said Tommy Belden. "Ten-eleven more payments, and I'll be my own man again."

Walt looked up from the sheaf of bills and steadied a dark, searching gaze on his younger brother's face. "Thanks, Tommy," he said softly. "I hope it's money you worked for."

The kid's cheeks flattened and his eyes crinkled slightly at the corners. "Yeah, Walt—I reckon I worked for it. I had me a fill-in job at Baxter's Squable M spread. Know that spread, Walt? It's the kind of place where your bunk never has time to warm up and your hull never has time to cool off. I worked there for two months—" the gray eyes squeezed tighter— "and I got eighty dollars, and a steady diet of beans."

"There are worse ways to earn money," Walt Belden said. He opened a drawer and carelessly dropped the roll of bills inside. "But you've been gone a whole year, kid, and I'm kind of curious about what you were doing the other ten months."

Tommy lit his dead cigarette, and the upward flare of the match struck against eyes grown cautious and still. There had been words on his lips, but he swallowed them and found the taste bitter as alkali. They would only have proved indisputably what everybody had always said: that Tommy was the ladino of the two Belden boys. That he was the wild one, the true son of old Rideaway Jack Belden, who had scratched out a dubious existence by slow-elking other men's cattle and peddling busthead moonshine to all comers. He had kicked out his life at the end of an upraised wagon-tongue when, mistakenly, he had assumed that his neighbors could spare an occasional herd, as well as an occasional critter.

Walt had had the strength to live down that heritage, but the kid had not. He knew it, and the sense of his own inadequacy raised a wall between himself and his brother. Dimly the kid realized that Walt was trying to break through that wall, but his own stubborn pride locked him in a remote, unyielding silence.

"All right, Tommy," Walt Belden said. "It's a question you don't have to answer. After all, I'm only your brother—eh?"

Now, if ever, was the time to speak out. With Denver Red and his gunmen in town . . . But the moment passed, and the kid could not pull those lost words back to his lips. He smiled faintly and shaped other words, putting a deliberate sting in them.

"You'll get the money I owe you, Walt. May come in a peso at a time, but I'll see to it you don't go on the county."

Walt shifted his bulk and said in that slow, patient way: "It ain't the money, kid. You know that! But there are lessons a man has to learn, and one of 'em is not to gamble unless he can pay. You're learning it the tough way, Tommy, but I reckon maybe it's the best way, at that."

Anger tightened around Tommy's cheekbones, turning his grin into a grimace. "You'll get your money, hermano—the whole thousand dollars." And then, incredibly, he was saying the right thing in the wrong words. He was speaking from the bitterness inside him, and that bitterness warped his statement into something bleak and ugly. "I pay my gambling debts, Walt—even when I know the money's going to a houseful of crooks!"

Silence dropped its solid weight in the room, and against that hush Pop Oliphant cleared his throat on a loud, plaintive note.

Madge whispered, "Tommy! You don't know what you're—"

Walt straightened slowly and held his gaze on the kid. He said, "Crooks?"

Tommy thought, *I've made my play and now I got to back it up,* "If you don't know it," he said aloud, "I kind of figure you'd ought to. There's tinhorns and crooked housemen getting fat at the Lowhi. Robbing you and everybody else in Soledad. I ought to know. I—"

Walt rose quickly. His arm lifted, and there was the sharp sound of flesh striking flesh. The kid moved backward on the rims of his heels and leaned into the doorjamb, the print of a palm dark on his cheek. His right hand opened and closed spasmodically, fighting the magnetic tug of the Colt thonged low on his hip.

He said, "You could've heard me out, Walt. I guess maybe that'll be hard to forget," and his eyes shone thin and recklessly.

Walt said levely, "I hope so, Tommy. Seems there's one other lesson you got to learn: that a straight gambling man don't like to be called a tinhorn. I run an honest house here—the only one in Soledad, maybe. Try and remember that, will you?"

Pop Oliphant clucked nervously and moved a handkerchief over the bare dome of his skull.

Madge said, "Tommy! Walt! He—he couldn't have meant it like that, Walt."

"It couldn't have been read two ways," Walt Belden said slowly. He looked at Tommy again, and a characteristic gentleness softened the set of his mouth. "Well, let's try and forget it, kid—I reckon everybody runs off at the head now and then. Here's a greenback. Spend it on tanglefoot if you want to, but—" his fist slapped into the hollow of one palm— "you stay away from my tables! Hear me? Stay away!"

Tommy stared at the proffered bill and his lips bent in that familiar lean smile. He said, "Thanks, Santy Claus. I guess I'll have me a time."

THE kid lounged on one of the pine benches under the Lowhi's wooden arcade and watched a tilted summer moon pour molten silver onto the far peaks of the Ramirenas. July heat lay hot and heavy on the plaza, and all around Tommy there was a lanquid hush, against which Soledad's familiar night sounds were only as lazy riffles in a roiled pond.

A violin's wail climbed through the roof of the Oasis, and men moved in companionable knots along the slatted sidewalk. There was the usual stir of talk and laughter. But every sound had a sleepy, detached and dreamlike quality.

It occurred to Tommy that on this hot night he was probably the only man in town who felt a chill along his spine. Well, there was a reason. . . .

The kid pulled fast at his cigarette, and the backwash of light struck a face too old for its eighteen years. He thought, *They'll be coming soon—and what will I tell them?*

They came. The bench creaked on either side of him, and two pairs of shoulders sandwiched him there. A third figure paused not far away.

Tommy said, "Well?"

The voice to his left was almost musical in its softness. It came from small, pink lips cut in a pale mound of face where nothing lived but the eyes—watchful eyes flecked with spots of rust in the iris. The voice said, "We hope you've thought it over, kid. We need you bad."

Tommy said through stiff lips: "I've thought it over, Denver, and I reckon the answer's still the same. I made a big mistake a year ago, but that don't mean I'm gonna keep on making it."

Denver Red laid his arm affectionately on the kid's left shoulder. Through that

smooth broadcloth sleeve Tommy felt the weight of the gambler's hideout derringer —a small, hard core of menace like the threat wrapped up in the man's gentle voice. "You're making a bigger one now, Tommy. I don't like double-crossers, you know. But you play along with the crowd, sort of, and maybe I'll forget all about your skipping Albuquerque so sudden-like that night. By the way, you ain't said hello to the boys."

Tommy's eyes swung from the cream-cheese face of Denver Red. He said slowly, "Hello, boys."

"You act like you don't remember 'em. Just in case, the tall gent next to you is Vickers—Roy Vickers. And this is Tim Coone. You remember now, don't you? Good friends of mine, Tommy. And they don't like people I don't like."

The kid looked from a gaunt, bilious face to a broader, flatter one, both caught in an inflexible calm that classified them as positively as did the easy hang of their guns. He remembered them, all right.

The tip of his cigarette glowed and he said to Denver Red, "How big a haul?"

"Five thousand tonight, but no more. You being a relative of the owner, I figured we can get away with that much. And we've got backing in this town, kid—important backing. What do you say It's a deal?"

"So all I've got to do is help euchre my own brother."

Denver Red laughed softly, impervious to irony. "That's all, Tommy. And I think maybe you'll play along. In spite of everything you've said, I guess we can count on you."

The kid sat in a moody silence, his thoughts moving behind eyes that were narrow and still. He touched the welt on his left cheekbone and his eyes shrank tighter. He said slowly, "Maybe you can, Red . . . Yeah, I reckon maybe you can, at that."

Red laughed again. "Hear that, boys? I told you he was a real smart button."

An hour later, Marshal Bert Strawn raised a speculative glance to Tommy's face as the kid batted through the door of the casino room. A small, portly man with bland eyes that tilted like a drowsy kitten's, Strawn was lounging idly against the wall and prospecting among his back teeth with a quill toothpick. He tongued the toothpick to one corner of his mouth and said, "Hello, Tommy. Gonna play the games or sweat 'em?"

"Play 'em," said the kid.

He gave his eyes a quick run of the room.

Denver Red and his still-faced paisanos sat at a poker table not far from the side door, the three of them elaborately absorbed in light-stakes stud. A small loop of men encircled the faro tables, but the big play was at the lineup of wheel layouts alongside the casino's north wall. Faces were banked there in a solid wedge of flesh, and the croupiers laid their steady chant across the decorous hush that lived in the room. The Lowhi drew a soft-spoken crowd—a neighborly crowd that had known Walt Belden as a rider and a rancher.

Strawn said, "Not many folks winnin' on the wheels lately, kid." A vague smile creased his cheeks. "Maybe you'll have better luck, though."

"Might be," said Tommy. His eyes were on Denver Red. The gambler's gaze lifted momentarily from his cards, and in it there was a sudden, steely quality as naked as the blade of a Bowie knife.

"Play it smooth and easy, kid—I'll be watching you," Denver Red's eyes warned.

The kid smiled. He edged past Soledad's marshal and unobtrusively added his face to the row along the number two table.

Blackie Burless was a sallow, inscrutable figure behind the wheel; but in the casual sideways tilt of his head there was a message as unmistakable as Denver Red's

had been—if you knew how to read it. . . .

Seven dollars remained of the ten that Walt had given the kid; the rest had gone for stirrup-cups at the bar. He stacked his seven silver dollars on the red.

The wheel clicked and came to a halt. The croupier pushed seven more dollars at Tommy and his glance whisked sideways again.

Blackie asked woodenly, "Play the fourteen?"

"Sure. Leave 'er on red."

The man back of the wheel coaxed it into a gay, dwindling hum. Tommy's eyes veered from that narrow face to the vagrant marble. It stopped on the red again.

"The twenty-eight on black," said Tommy, watching Burless' signal.

He won. And lost six dollars on the third spin so that his stack would be even money. Looking into the smooth, pale calm of Blackie Burless' face, the kid thought: *Hello, Blackie. You see, I still remember the system. Glance left—red. Glance right. . . .*

"Fifty on the black," he said aloud.

The fifty climbed to a hundred; two hundred, three. Tommy doubled the three hundred; and then, in silence that was tucking itself around him like a quilt, he let a hundred dollars go to the house.

Behind him Pop Oliphant said paternally: "A good gambler knows when to quit, Tommy."

"I ain't a good gambler," said the kid.

He watched the shift of Burless' eye and deliberately put five hundred on the black.

HALF an hour later Tommy's original seven dollars had grown to five thousand, and now that hush stretched its stifling pressure from one end of the casino to the other. Tommy felt the weight of eyes upon him—all the eyes in the room. He listened to a single magnified breath that moved on the silence without disturbing it. He caught an eye-tail glimpse of Walt Belden's lank figure, propped woodenly against the balcony railing above him; and of Denver's Red's broader one, poised between Coone and Vickers on the fringe of the crowd . . . watching him.

The choice was his. He could cash in now and Denver Red's game would be safe: other men had had five-thousand-dollar runs in Soledad. Or he could do as he had planned to do—hang and rattle on the wheel until Walt and everybody else knew that tinhorns were wringing the blood out of this town.

One way was easy, and that was the way that old Jack Belden's son would choose. The other way was the hard one, and that was the alternative Walt Belden's brother should take. . . . The kid knew this for the reckoning—the last, irrevocable choice between two ways of life.

He looked full into the houseman's face and smiled his lean, hard smile. He said very soberly, "Five thousand on the red."

Burless stiffened. The kid had crowded him to the end of a limb, and for a moment his uncertainty betrayed itself. His hand wavered above the wheel, and there was a question in his eyes.

"You heard me, didn't you?" Tommy said softly. "I'm letting the five thousand ride."

His words defined the issue so clearly that Burless could not hesitate. The marble hopped again. The crowd let out breath in a vast, cooperative sigh.

Tommy said: "This sure beats chousing cattle."

Walt Belden came like a sleepwalker down the stairs and shouldered through the crowd to stand near Marshal Bert Strawn. The kid saw him there as his sideways glance noted the discreet withdrawal of Coone, Vickers and Denver Red.

Blackie Burless droned, "Gents, place your bets," though no one was riding the wheel but Tommy.

The kid looked at him again. He watched that frantic question break to the surface of Burless' eyes, and he sensed something

of the struggle going on within the man.

Burless was clearly afraid of this: he saw where it was leading and he knew what the reaction of the crowd would be. But he was more afraid of Denver Red, and Tommy knew he would assume that Red had changed his plans at the last moment —that he had ordered a quick, bold coup, and the devil take the consequences.

Seeing all this, the kid laughed with his eyes, saying, "Ten thousand on the red."

A single bead of sweat gathered on Blackie's smooth upper lip. The wheel threw its hum into that tall silence; and the marble shivered, settled. Tommy swung from the table and looked levely at his brother.

"Give it to me in big bills, Walt. Twenty thousand, minus the thousand I lost to you a year ago. Wrap a string around the roll so it'll be easy to handle."

Walt Belden's eyes made a queer dark shimmer in a face grown stiff and cold. "I'll keep it in the safe for you, Tommy."

"No."

"You're planning to take that much money out on the street?"

"Sure," said the kid. "You can pay off, can't you, Walt? A man shouldn't gamble unless he can pay, you know."

"I can pay," said Walt.

His wide shoulders cut a trail through the crowd and he went slowly up the stairs. The kid waited, lounging back against the table and piling cigarette smoke in front of his face. The crowd waited with him, and under its silence Tommy sensed the flow of a live speculation.

When Walt Belden returned downstairs, he pushed a heavy sheaf of bills into Tommy's hands and said dully: "It's all there, kid. Tally it if you want to."

Tommy said, "I'll take your word."

He turned toward the side door through which Denver Red and his gunmen had gone. Walt Belden's big hands dropped to the Colts slung low on either hip, and he scraped the crowd with one hard glance.

"Case somebody's got a short memory, this kid happens to be my brother. Nobody leaves the Lowhi for a full five minutes after Tommy goes."

The kid said, "Thanks, Walt." He left a short, soft laugh in the room and batted out into the night—where men would be waiting to kill him. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Gun-Buzzards Gather

WALT BELDEN looked at his watch and said stolidly: "All right, folks, the five minutes is up. There'll be no more play here tonight, at the wheels or anywhere else. You want to know why, I'll tell you. The Lowhi is broke."

Strawn's brows arched in a sandy V above his tilted eyes. "You mean flat broke, Walt?"

"Flat, Marshal."

Talk made a nervous small ripple in the room and against that sound Pop Oliphant's voice scratched with a slaty distinctness. Thumbs pigeon-holed in the pockets of his vest, he leaned forward pushing a bright scrutiny at Walt Belden. And said: "I bought me a dead bronc once in my younger days—but I reckon this is the first time I ever bought a horse and then watched the seller kill it in my own corral."

Walt Belden said gravely, "I hope you don't really think that's how it was, Pop."

"I've knowed you a long time, Walt, and I don't want to think so, but—"

The old man broke off sharply, moving with a sudden catlike agility. He said, "Burless!" and his voice licked the air like a mule-skinner's blacksnake.

Blackie Burless' hunched thin shoulders stiffened against the panel of the side-door.

"Burless!" said Pop Oliphant again.

The houseman turned slowly. He looked from Oliphant's dour face to the thumb curled casually in a low gun-belt, and his own features tugged into a labored calm.

Bert Strawn fingered his badge and said: "One minute, Pop. Let's have no trouble here. What's your interest in this deal?"

"Call it a half interest," Pop Oliphant said succinctly. "Three hours ago I swapped my nest-egg for a fifty-per-cent partnership in the Lowhi. Now I'm busted along with the bank, and I'm busted by the brother of the man I bought in with. The same man was fixing to marry my daughter. Things being thataway, Marshal . . ."

Strawn teetered gently and made blue streaks of his eyes. "Guess maybe I can smell that dead cayuse in your corral, Pop. Would you be wanting to swear out a warrant for anybody?"

"I'm wanting to ask a few questions, is all—and I reckon a man's got a right to ask questions of his own help . . . Burless!"

The houseman said flatly, "Well?"

"That deal was rigged."

"No," said Burless. "The kid had a run of luck, that's all. He—"

Pop Oliphant said inexorably, "It was rigged, I tell you! Nobody's been having that kind of luck at the Lowhi. Who was in it, Burless? Was it just between you and the kid, or does somebody else get a cut of my savings?"

Walt Belden's voice fell flat and heavy against the pause. "You'll get your savings back, Pop. But I'm the man that hired Burless, and I'm the man that'll do the asking. . . . Clear out, Pop! And you, Strawn. And everybody else in the place but Blackie."

Strawn said judicially, "As the duly elected marshal of this municipality, I figure the matter deserves my—"

"And I figure it's private business until there's a warrant issued. I'm saying once more: Get out! A tin star ain't a suit of armor, Strawn, and I don't see nobody else in the crowd I'd need to use a can-opener on."

Putting their own interpretation on this, men began to pour hurriedly through the exits. . . .

THE kid leaned back against the alley wall of the Palace Hotel and flicked a tight, wary glance through the darkness around him. Save for the ruler-sharp line of shadow that paralleled a high board fence to his left, the alley was caught in moonlight—a bland white moonlight that gave substance and clarity to everything it touched.

He was sorry about that. Though the light would enable him to see his enemies—if and when they appeared—it would likewise enable his enemies to see him. And there were several of them.

Once outside the Lowhi, the kid had felt his nonchalance shredding away like a shirt in a briar-patch. He was eighteen years old; the love of life ran quick in his veins and he did not want to die. Weighing the probable consequences of his gesture, he wondered if there might not have been a safer way to show Walt Belden that planted housemen were systematically shaking down his clientele and shoving the proceeds, to planted winners.

But what other way? What safer way?

The kid's mouth bent and that brash, bright glow returned to his eyes. It came to him that he would not have chosen any other way; that he had mapped his trail with the coolest deliberation; and that even now, striking through his fear, there was a buoyant sense of relief inside him.

Once and for all he had cut himself off from the sun-dodging syndicate that had absorbed him in the Rincon country, lost him at Albuquerque, and tried to re-absorb him in his own home town. Maybe he had cut himself off from life as well; but at least—in these few final minutes allotted to him—he would be Walt Belden's brother again.

The kid thought, *Well, a man can't get to the hills by looking at 'em,* as he followed that line of shadow along the board fence until the alley broke on a side-street where cottonwoods laid their thicker, friendlier shade.

He turned south, still hugging the shadows, and made for Brill's Stable, a haggard old bat of a structure spreading its ribbed wings against the moonlight.

His hand was at the cleated door when Pop Oliphant came noiselessly around the side of the building and dug a gun-sight into his third rib.

"Huntin' a horse, Tommy?" said Pop Oliphant.

The kid stiffened. He looked from the gun to the face above it, and said: "Why, yeah. Happens I am. I left my horse in there this afternoon, and I thought maybe I'd take me a little canter in the moonlight. . . . Any objections, Pop?"

"Don't reach, Tommy! I'll try and wing you if you fill your hand, but I wouldn't even want to wing a kid who maybe needs nothing more than a rawhide finish. What say you and me have us a little palaver before you do any riding, Tommy?"

"Any other time," said the kid, "I wouldn't mind. But now I'm kind of anxious to be breaking clods, Pop."

The gun pushed deeper into Tommy's rib. "Don't rile me, son—I'm a crotchety old man. Them clods will have to stay the same size until you fork over the nineteen thousand dollars you taken out of the Low-hi."

The kid's eyes flared; contracted. He said in a tight voice, "I haven't got it, Pop. And even if I had it, it'd take more than a gun to scare it out of me. Soon as Walt's learned his lesson, that money goes back to him in one piece. . . . Does Madge know you're tied up with Denver Red's crowd, Pop?"

"With—who's Denver Red? I want that roll, Tommy. Why, doggone it, half of that is my money! Mine! You cleaned me out on one turn of the wheel, and any fool could see the game was rigged from here to Sunday."

The kid said, "Your money? You mean you own a piece of—I didn't know, Pop. Honest, I didn't know."

Pop Oliphant's stare reached through Tommy's eyes and rummaged around in every drawer of his brain. Then the grinding pressure of the gun relaxed.

Pop Oliphant said gently: "I guess you didn't, kid. And I guess I been thinking things of Walt Belden that only a polecat would think of his future son-in-law. . . . Kid, maybe you had your reasons for doing what you done, but it wasn't the smart thing to do. You've got yourself and your brother in a tight. Know what folks are saying? That Walt Belden runs a tinhorn house and that he conspired with you to cheat an old man out of his savings."

The kid said fiercely, "It wasn't that way, Pop! Walt didn't know there was an easy money crowd using his tables. I knew—I knew, because I used to belong to the crowd. Denver Red paid me a hundred a month to cap for the outfit at different gambling houses. I—I drifted into it because I was sore at Walt, but I got sick of it the first week. And then, well, they—"

"And they wouldn't let you go?" Pop cut in. "Was that the way it went, Tommy?"

"What's one slow gun against a crowd of fast ones, Pop? Well, I shook them a couple months ago, but they caught up with me here. Denver Red was the first man in sight when I stepped into the Lowhi this evening. I thought. . . . Pop, *honest,* I thought—"

"I guess I know what you thought, Tommy. That you'd run the play high enough to tip their hand. Well, you done it—but you also left Walt up the river with a seven-dollar team! Kid, you might better have told him the truth instead of trying to show him."

Tommy said drearily, "I know it, Pop. I know it now. I was sore because he belted me one when I started to tell him."

"Well," said Pop Oliphant, "lots of folks make bad mistakes when they're your age, Tommy. When they're a little older, o' course, they've had more experience and

can make worse ones. . . . I figure you better not go for no moonlight canter, son. Me, I'd get that money back to Walt so fast that—"

There was the faintest rustle beside them. "We'll take care of the money for you, Tommy," Denver Red said obligingly. And it was quite plain that he was not alone.

THEY stood in a tight, compact group close to the side-wall of the building, and three leveled guns laid a solid threat in front of them. The lank man named Vickers; the squat man named Coone; and the butter-faced man with the butter-soft voice—Denver Red.

The kid said, "Wait! Wait, Pop! Don't make a—"

But Pop Oliphant was an old man whose Colts had helped write the smoky history of an epoch. At the sound of Denver Red's voice he had spun on his bootheels and dropped into a crouch, and even as the kid spoke his gun-arm was snapping upward. It wasn't Pop Oliphant's Colt, however, that whipped a thin, flat whine against the night. It was Denver Red's.

Tommy's own hand was full of gun by then, but only once did the hammer roll beneath his thumb. The shot took a bite of the drooping eaves above him, thrown helplessly wild when Pop Oliphant slouched hard and fast into the kid's knees.

Tommy went down, and the gun jumped out of his slack fingers and hit the wall. He let it stay there, knowing it was a good twelve feet away. He sat on his heels and said, "Pop! Pop. . . ."

Pop Oliphant lay quite still.

The kid whispered, "Pop!" and touched his body with fingers that came away damp. He looked thoughtfully at them and raised tight dangerous eyes to the face of Denver Red.

"It wasn't his game, Red."

"He just now bought chips in it, kid, and it ain't my fault he insisted on cashing 'em in." Denver Red moved forward in a calm, purposeful way, sided by Coone and Vickers. Reprovingly, he said, "It was a bad thing you did back there in the Lowhi, Tommy. Very bad. Now it's done, though, we'll try and make the best of it. Where's the nineteen thousand, Tommy?"

The kid gave them a thin, wicked laugh. "You can search me, boys."

Coone searched him with urgent stubby fingers. "It ain't on him, Red."

"Well, then . . ." said Denver Red through thin lips.

Coone's fist drove its jewelry hard into Tommy lips. Tommy hit the ground in a crooked sprawl, and Vickers laid a boot-heel heavily under his right cheekbone. The kid flattened his palms in the dust and came up laughing through the taste of blood.

He said, "There's no harm telling you, I reckon. It's at the Lowhi, Red—every cent of it. I stashed it there."

"Where, Tommy? What part of the Lowhi?"

The kid laughed.

Denver Red said patiently, "We don't figure to make dust without it, Tommy. Nineteen thousand is real dinero these days. And we got enough backing right here in Soledad so's we can pick up the town and wring it like a bird's neck if we want to. . . . Now where did you put the roll, kid?"

Moonlight shimmered on the laughing bloody mask of the kid's face. "I ain't smart, Red, but I've got sense enough to know I'm gonna eat lead either way. So why should I tell you, tinhorn?"

"Here's why," said Vickers.

A gun-sight parted the flesh of Tommy's jaw in a wicked crow-wise cut. The kid's thin body sunfished crazily and threw him into the dust. He rolled over twice and then crouched on his hunkers with Pop Oliphant's Colt in his hand. He swung the barrel this way and that, searching for a visible target in the red fog that boiled around him.

Vickers said wearily, "That ain't smart, kid!" and planted his gun-barrel back of Tommy's ear.

Tommy put his face in the crook of one arm and went to sleep that way, not caring any more. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Death Trap

WALT BELDEN said, "Tommy! Come out of it now! Come out of it!" He shook the kid gently from side to side, a movement that turned Tommy's head on his shoulders like a sunflower on a broken stalk.

Blinking, the kid made a sleepy grin and mumbled: "Sure, Walt. All ri'. I don't—smell the—coffee, though. . . ."

Walt's fingers bored deeper into his flesh. "Tommy! You got to wake up!"

The kid's neck stiffened. He stared into Walt Belden's tired face and his eyes colored slowly with the backwash of memory.

"Walt," he said. "Le' me tell you, Walt! It was a fool's play—I know that. But it wasn't like you think. No matter what they say, I wasn't aiming to—to slope with your money."

"I know that," kid," Walt Belden said. "I reckon the money's in a safe enough place. But . . ."

The kid followed his glance. He saw Madge Oliphant, a slim, small figure kneeling close to Pop's slack body, and the sight of her cut deep.

Tommy balanced his weight on widespread legs and looked down at the girl's bent head, dusty with moonlight. He said drearily: "It's tough to be an acquaintance of mine, Madge."

Sh tipped her face and gave him a laborious little smile. "He's not dead, Tommy. It's only a flesh wound, and we roused Dad Brill and sent him after Doc Hooker. Don't you go and worry, Tommy. We won't let him die."

"It was my fault," the kid said desolately. "I dealt him into this." He swung on Walt Belden, his eyes darkening with a thought. "But I didn't shoot him, Walt! If that's what you're thinking—"

"I ain't thinking it, Tommy. We got here in time to see your—your friends, and I reckon that's the only reason you're still alive. They lit a shuck when they heard us coming, not knowing there was only the two of us." He paused. "Kid, I'm knee-deep in quicksand."

"But the money's safe, Walt. It's in—"

"Never mind the money now," said Walt Belden. "After you left, kid, I took Blackie Burless into the back room of the Lowhi and gun-whipped a few answers out of him. He was talking pretty along toward the last, but he quit talking all of a sudden. Because somebody bushwhacked him through the alley window."

The kid's eyes narrowed. He said huskily, "Bushwhacked Blackie? But, Walt, who would've—Denver Red and his men were over here gunning for me."

Walt nodded. "I dunno who done it, Tommy, and I guess maybe I ain't gonna have time to find out. I was alone with Burless when it happened. Well, you know what the law'll figure, don't you?"

"That it's your lead in him." The kid made a bitter mouth. "I reckon I been lots of help to you, Walt. Has anybody found the—"

A darker shadow silently emerged from the shaded building side, and Marshal Bert Strawn said laconically, "Why, yeah. I found Blackie, boys. Reach high, you murdering sons!"

He ghost-stepped forward then, a small, stubby shadow preceded by the tubular dark snout of a sixgun. Walt and Tommy faced him and slowly stiffened their hands.

Madge Oliphant said, "It's not the way you think, Marshal! You can't . . ."

Strawn's gaze shuttled past her and found the sprawled shape of Pop Oliphant. His eyes drew deeper into their burrows

and he swung the gun-barrel in a tense, wary arc. "Your daddy, Madge?"

"Y-yes."

"Dead?"

"N-no. Just wounded. He—"

Strawn's eyes emerged again and made an oblique shine like the eyes of a contented cat. He rocked gently on his heels and looked at Tommy and Walt.

"We'll say it was this way. You shot Burless, Walt, because he was in on the play and you were afraid he'd talk. You were aiming to hide the body later, I reckon. . . . While that was happening, Pop Oliphant cut sign on the kid, here, and the kid shot him. Makes sense, don't it?"

Madge said, "No! There were other men here—Walt and I saw them. And Walt couldn't have—"

"Naturally," said Strawn, "you'd try and protect the man you was aiming to marry, Madge. And even his worthless brother, maybe. But you're doing the wrong thing by your poor old dad."

An idea shaped itself suddenly in the kid's brain, and with that idea he felt the tug of an all but ungovernable fury. His feet moved restively in the dust and he hung a hard, unwinking stare on the marshal's face.

"Maybe one reason you found Blackie so soon was that you knew just where to look. Maybe you knew where to look for Pop Oliphant, too."

"Huh?"

"Yeah. Denver Red says he's got backing here—enough so's he can turn Soledad upside down if he takes the notion. Well, you're it, Marshal. And you killed Burless—gulched him because you knew Walt would slap the truth out of him. Ain't that right, Strawn? Ain't it?"

The silence was measred by the quickened thud of the kid's heart. The gun-barrel stiffened on Tommy Belden, and above it Bert Strawn's eyes brightened with a sudden wild hunger that ebbed away, leaving them flat and secretive again.

Walt said, "You'd make a mighty poor poker player, Strawn," and the marshal showed his teeth in a dainty smile.

"We'll be going over to the juzgado now, boys. Wish the walls was a little thicker, though—folks may be pretty hard to handle when they hear about Burless and Pop." The words were edged with a purpose as bald as his dislike. "This town don't cotton much to crooked gamblers—still less to murdering ones. Who—"

His head jerked sideways. Feet rapped out a brisk tattoo in the yonder darkness, and Doc Hooker's heavy rumble merged with the thin, acidulous voice of Dad Brill.

For no more than two bats of an eye had the marshal's attention wandered, but that brief lapse cost him all the advantage a leveled gun had given him. The kid's tight muscles let go like bowstrings, and the kid's head went under the gun and into Strawn's ribs with all the weight of his body behind it. . . .

AFTERWARDS, the night chopped itself into short, crazy sequences. Madge screamed. Strawn, thrown backwards, shot at the moon. Tommy straightened and his fist hit him on the point of the chin. The gun skipped out of Strawn's nerveless fingers. He lay in the dust and bawled, "Doc! Brill! Get them, the murdering—"

Madge was saying, "I'll take care of Pop, Walt! Run—run! They'll shoot you down like . . ."

And then the shadows of the cottonwoods had folded around them, and Brill and Hooker were throwing lead. To their left, an upstairs window popped open and somebody in a nightshirt joyously laid a scattergun across the sill. Birdshot minced the leaves above them; and Tommy's gun-arm lifted and went numb in his brother's grip.

"No, kid! No!"

"But they're shooting at us!"

"Strawn is the law, kid, and they think they've got a right to. We won't shoot back. Come on."

Tommy followed him, seeing the justice of this and hating himself for the temper that would have blinded him to it. Lead no longer nagged at their heels, and space muffled the boom of the shotgun, so that they knew the owner was merely having himself a time.

As they jogged into the alley where moonlight laid its silver witchery on everything, Tommy said, "Wait, Walt! *Wait!*"

"Well?"

"This is loco. Strawn will drum up a crowd and make us hosts at a hemp-party, sure. That's what he was aiming to do when he got us in the cooler. . . . Walt, we should have burned leather straight out of town."

Walt said soberly, "That may be, kid. I dunno. But dawn's no more than a hoot away, and what chance would we have in the open country? Sometimes men'll shoot a flyin' bird that wouldn't think of shootin' one on a limb. I figure we better tough it out and take our chances, kid."

"You mean . . . ?"

"Let's fort up in my hotel room and see what happens. Strawn will know we're there, I reckon, and he'll probably do all he can about it. But Pop Oliphant will clear you when and if he comes to, and Madge can maybe talk some sense into the hotheads. . . . I—well, Tommy, I been sort of proud about what folks thought of me here in Soledad. And now I kinda hate to fog out of town like a man that knows he's guilty."

The kid's mouth twisted. "You're right, Walt," he said slowly. "I—I guess none of this would've happened if I'd had the guts to face things, instead of running away from 'em. . . . I made another mistake when I jumped Strawn back there, Walt. Afterwards, you had to run like a hound-dog in a split stick same as me."

"It's all right, kid. And look, Tommy . . . you can pick up a horse and grab for distance if you want to. It might be the smart thing."

The kid shook his head. "Not this time, Walt. Hereafter I'm running into things—instead of away from 'em!"

In the hotel room, in darkness broken only by the ruby pulse of cigarettes, Walt sprawled on his disordered bed and said nothing at all. The kid teetered in a straight-backed chair and said as little. But under this quiet their thoughts ran deep, and between them there was understanding that had no need of words. . . .

They were together again as they had not been together since that long-gone night when they'd crouched on a comb ridge, two sick, shivering kids, and watched old Jack Belden die in a coil of rope.

Thinking of that night, remembering the strength they had sought and found in each other—as they were finding it now—Tommy Belden reflected that kinship was something more than an accident of birth. Or a casual word. It was a tie whose hard, sinewy endurance no man could gauge until fear and danger had tested it.

Out in the corridor, Marshal Bert Strawn put his shoulder to the locked door and then edged hastily away. The night clerk made small, coaxing sounds like a sage-hen calling its young.

Strawn said, "Come out of it, Walt! Come out or we'll gun you out!"

Somewhere in the street below, a sixgun barked at the sky.

Walt said placidly, "You'd better hurry, you pot-bellied son. Pretty soon folks may get to thinking things over, and then they'll grease their rope for a fatter neck than mine."

The kid smiled at this, but his eyes were bitter with a thought: Soledad's citizenry apparently did not suspect that he forted up with his brother; knowing his habits, they supposed him to be skulking like a coyote cub somewhere in the shadows. . . . The kid crossed the room and pushed aside the smoky yellow blind; and looked down into the moonlit street one story below.

Strawn had worked fast but well. Men

boiled in a restless mass down there, knowing the purposeful anger that men know when they feel themselves betrayed by someone they have liked and trusted. A rifle suddenly threw its lean, wicked whine from the shade of an awning-post, and Tommy stepped backward with the window-glass chattering around him. His glowing quirly had given him away.

The rifle whined again; and an ancient portrait of General Lee jumped on the wall.

Walt said through the dying echoes, "Don't shoot back, kid. Not at neighbors. Save your lead for Denver Red's outfit. . . . Many down there?"

"Street looks kind of congested," the kid said dourly. "Everybody that's been losing money on your wheels, I reckon. I think I see Madge, Walt, but they don't seem to be paying much attention to her. Reckon maybe it's our night to bend a cottonwood limb."

The long gun cracked again. Walt spat a piece of plaster from his lips and said: "We'll stand on our cards, kid. And if they get us, we'll die the way Dad did. He wasn't much 'count, maybe, accordin' to the rules they measured men by, but I've seen prouder-necked men make a lot more noise when the rope was bein' slung for 'em."

A rifle slug glanced off the enameled water pitcher. Casually, Walt said, "Must be old Lute Ferriss with that Henry gun he's so partial to. Don't seem to be stoppin' for a re-load."

FEET clumped in the outer corridor again. Strawn put his mouth close to the keyhole and spoke in a conspiratorial mumble. "I been holdin' 'em off the best I could, Walt. I don't want nothin' real serious to happen yet, and I been talkin' law and order and peaceful surrender. But I can't hold 'em much longer—they're gettin' restless."

General Lee's portrait leaped and fell.

"See what I mean?"

"Kind of," said Walt Belden. "Ain't there any respectable Johnny Rebs out there? And how come you're bein' so big-hearted, you unhung son of a tick-eaten sheeper?"

The marshal's voice sank lower. "I got rid of that sniveling clerk, Walt, and now we can do business. Men have bought themselves out of worse tights than this, you know."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Might be you'd find a nice handy exit open if you could tell me where the kid put that roll of dinero."

Walt slanted his Colt. Muzzle-light flared suddenly in the room, flashing and fading and flashing again, and the upper frame of the door loosed splinters like a quill-hog.

Strawn went away, his voice drifting back to them. "All right. If that's your answer, you'll get mine!"

"Reckon he'll turn 'em loose on us now," Walt Belden said.

"Yeah. Sorry I roped you into all this, Walt."

"Ah, kid, I roped you into it. Hadn't been for me, you'd have a nice warm saddle under you this minute."

And silence closed in once more, breaking on an occasional volley of shots that died away to leave it more intact than ever. A sudden, vicious enfilade raked the air like a spring-tooth harrow; then the waiting and the hush again.

Walt mopped at a wet groove under his cheekbone. The kid pinched out his smoke and moved catlike to the window. He stiffened there and stood quite straight and still, forgetting the guns below, his face taking life from the faint pinkish glow that sifted into the room.

Walt said, "Hey, kid! What the blue blazes? . . . That—that light, Tommy. Is it dawn already?"

The kid watched a tawny spearhead of light prod at the sky and fork into other spearheads, and his nostrils thinned to the hot stench of woodsmoke. One of Jack

Belden's long-forgotten oaths came to his lips.

"That's firelight, Walt. Somebody laid a torch to the roof-timbers of the Lowhi."

Walt's feet hit the floor. "So they're burning me out, are they?"

The kid said, "That would be Denver Red's outfit, Walt—and Bert Strawn's. They think I'm brush-poppin' out there somewheres, and they figure I'll make a bee-line for that cache of money."

His muscles tightened and he added, very softly: "I reckon I will, at that."

"Huh? Tommy!" Walt Belden was at his brother's side in a single bearlike lunge. "What do you mean by—"

"I got to do it, Walt. I got to! Not just because it's your money—yours and Pop's. . . . I know that cash-loco outfit, and I know they'll make some kind of wild play the minute I lay my hands on the dinero. That'll bring things to a showdown, Walt, and afterwards maybe folks'll know you're in the clear on this. I reckon it's the only way they'll ever know."

"Lord, kid! You think I want to be cleared that way? Why, you little fool, I—I half believe you mean it!"

"Yeah," said the kid, and was faintly surprised at the hard edge of resolve in his voice. "I mean it, Walt. This is one of them things I'm running into, instead of away from!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Night of Flaming Death

AS HE looked down into that firelit street, bristling with guns as a cholla patch bristles with thorns, the kid found himself thinking irrelevantly of a red-headed girl he had kissed one night at a barn dance on the Squable M. Of how the stealthy fiddle-song had woven itself around them and pulled their mouths together, and the crowd had hoorawed them both when the Rochester lamps burst into light and caught them that way in the middle of the floor. . . .

There had been other girls and other kisses; and even the long, hard rides and the bunkhouse brawls seemed strangely sweet in retrospect. Now that he was about to die, the kid got to thinking that life had been a lot of fun.

For he was about to die.

He knew it, but he was going through with it. The money was there—Pop Oliphant's nest-egg and his brother Walt's—and it was there because he'd put it there. Crazy or not, he had to take his chance-in-a-million of retrieving it. . . .

But there was more to it than that, a whole lot more. When he slapped that challenge into Denver Red's teeth, he'd assured himself that he had the courage to face any issue the gambler could devise for him. Well, this was the issue, and he could face it or make a liar out of himself—and probably wind up hanging on a cottonwood limb, anyhow. This was it. All right, then. . . .

Walt's fingers went deep into the flesh of his shoulder, swinging him away from the sill. "I said no! Forget the money and forget everything else! I'm not lettin' you—"

The kid used one flattened palm, and Walt went backwards on his heels, slamming to a stop against the wall.

He said huskily, "You fool! There'll be at least a dozen guns on you. Red and his men will wait till they see where you hid the money, but the others will cut you to doll-rags before you've got thirty feet away."

"A man can try, can't he?" said Tommy Belden.

He dropped from the edge of the sill and caught his weight on spread fingers. For a halved instant the wash of the firelight silhouetted him there, a dangling target sketched in dark relief against the building-side. But no one shot. Tommy's grip loosened and his boots scuffed hard

into the soft dust below. He lit in a running sprawl.

They saw him now; but Tommy's heart had ticked off a dozen beats before any one of them could quite accept the reality of what he had seen. Silence cut in one swift, sure stroke through the crowd, and the kid's heels slapped rhythmically against that hush like somebody beating a rug.

A man bawled, "It's the kid! It's that murdering little—" and abruptly gunfire began to blast the night.

There were lots of guns, and all of them were talking at the same time. *Like a ladies' aid meeting at the local parsonage,* the kid thought deliriously as he ran. Colt six-shooters swept their crackling sheet of fire along the street, and above that sound there was the steady, authoritative spat of Lute Ferriss' Henry rifle.

He set his teeth and kept on going, weaving an erratic, zigzag course through that gauntlet of lead.

It came at that instant; the thing he'd been expecting. A slug ripped a shallow trench along his left thigh, and the kid's legs tangled and threw him flat.

"Got him!" Somebody whooped.

Tommy rolled. He rolled over and came to his feet, spreading them wide to bulwark his swaying body. For a moment he teetered there, blind with pain; and then he hunched his thin shoulders and jogged on.

To the left of the Lowhi was a rainbarrel equipped with a firebucket and an axe; and Tommy caught up the axe and raised it in fingers that felt strangely detached. The blade bit with a hollow thunk into the rough pine of the building side.

Walt's urgent voice sailed across that silence, shouting: "Kid, don't do it! Hit for cover!"

As at a signal, the Henry blasted again. Tommy felt the swift, nipping pinch of lead in his left shoulder, and he leaned into the Lowhi's wall and sank tiredly to his knees. Consciousness tried to escape him then, but the fierce intensity of resolution tugged it back. He straightened and picked up the fallen axe.

Useless, trying to get that money from this side of the wall. An utterly crazy thing! It would be out of reach, he knew; far down beneath the studdings. And the axe was heavier now, gigantic—an implement tailored for Paul Bunyan and manned by a stripling.

But the axe kept lifting and falling.

Twice they had seen the kid take lead, and twice they had seen him rise again; doggedly, indomitable, steeled to a purpose as illogical as his sublime indifference to death. Watching him now, an almost steady target against the building-side, the crowd was caught and held motionless by a sense of stark drama.

It was from Denver Red's crowd that the next shot came—as Tommy had half-expected it to come when he had revealed the whereabouts of the loot.

The kid straightened with an unnatural stance, and the axe curvetted from his widespread hands. His feet carried him backwards and then twisted slowly around to stretch him out in the dust of the street. He lay there on his face and though drowsily: *Well, I guess that does it. It's all over but the double funeral. . . .*

FEET slapped behind him. Somebody's hands moved with a quick gentleness over his body, searching out the wounds. Walt said, "Kid—*kid*—"

Tommy lay motionless and mumbled words into the dust. "Get inside, Walt—pronto! They think I'm dead. They won't shoot me, but they will you."

Bullets made a close whine around them, instantly confirming the kid's prophecy. Walt turned fast, gathered up the axe, and went in a swerving run toward the Lowhi. He vanished inside the building.

Things were vague after that, a stampede of semi-conscious impressions that the kid singled out and tallied by a prodigy

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of concentration. There was the heavy thump of the axe inside the Lowhi. There were a few scattered cheers rising above the crackle of the flames—evidence that the crowd's temper was shifting. But guns still chattered now and then, trying to reach Walt through that open door. . . . Two of his shots were muffled, directed toward the rear; and when a man's scream lifted thin and clear.

And finally there was an impression that shocked through Tommy like the jolt of another bullet. But it was no bullet; not this time. It was the tableau etched against the blood-red glare of the fire—Vickers and Denver Red pushing Madge Oliphant ahead of them.

Denver Red called, "Don't shoot, Belden. We've got us a chest-protector, and there's a gun in the middle of her back!"

Walt's answer was flat, defeated. "All right, boys—reckon it's your pot!"

The Lowhi was going fast. A steady gush of sparks showered the night sky as the building's pine ribs crumbled and fell, and now the flames were rushing downward from the upper story. But Red and Vickers pushed warily toward the door, tugged by a hunger that overrode their fear of death.

The townspeople could not shoot. There were those who had laid their reckoning on all this, but it was knowledge that came too late. Madge Oliphant was directly in the line of fire.

Violent nausea shook the kid's stomach and there was a glacial coldness around his brain. Maybe this was the advance shadow of death; he didn't know. All he knew was that his legs were beginning to move—that the scene had aroused the reflex of a final frantic effort within him. He could crawl.

He moved on all fours through the dust, pausing once to ease his gun out of its sheath, to heft its balance. But his muscles were strangely stiff, balky. He put it back. There was still time; Red and Vick-

ers were taking it easy, risking the imminent collapse of the building. But the kid knew that they would shoot Walt on sight and Madge would be next.

He kept on crawling. . . . And suddenly his heart gave a bound. His hand had struck something metallic lying there in the dust. A .30-30 carbine, dropped, apparently, by someone in the crowd. . . .

He picked it up, gently levered it. Firelight reflected on the brass disk in the chamber.

Nearer. . . . A little nearer, and the kid was close enough for a show now. But it must be a gambler's shot—a fool's shot. Denver Red held the gun in Madge's back, and Tommy Belden knew that only a slug placed neatly in the man's spine would keep his trigger-finger from tightening. That kind of shot would loosen his muscles, but any other kind. . . .

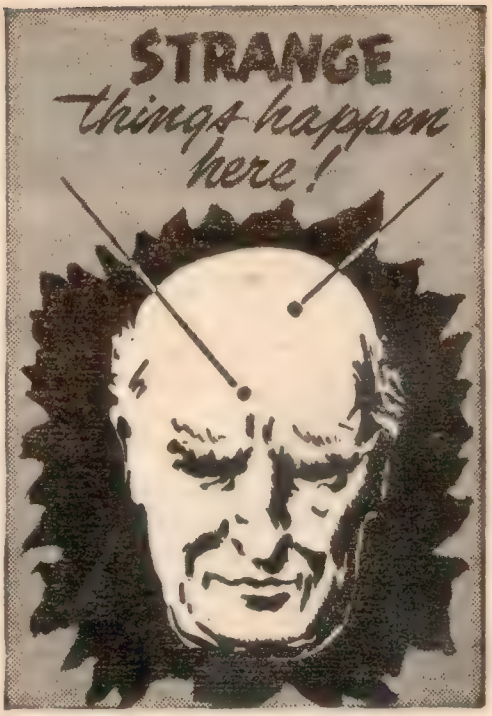
Tommy hefted the carbine and sighted along its wabbling barrel. Behind him a voice said heavily, "Hold it, Tommy—I've got you covered." It was the voice of Marshal Bert Strawn.

The kid said, "All right, Marshal," and fired as he spoke. It was a good shot, everything considered. Denver Red caved in the middle and fell in a loose sprawl to the ground, the gun dribbling from fingers that hadn't tightened.

Vickers had spun on his boot heels at the sound of Strawn's voice. He let Madge Oliphant sag from his grip and made a scrambling reach for his gun. But his fingers never got there. At that instant Tommy's brother bulked in the door of the Lowhi, a tall man thumbing the hammers of two busy Colts, and the close-spaced shots threw Vickers across the fallen body of Marshal Bert Strawn.

Walt stood over Strawn a moment later, the bundle of currency in his hand. His voice struck evenly through the confused murmur of the crowd.

"I got Coone in the Lowhi, Strawn.



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Vickers is dead and so is Denver, and there ain't more than a few breaths left in you. Me, I'd tell the truth if I was in your place. You killed Burless, and you knew from the first that a tinhorn syndicate was using my tables. You were getting a cut of the money, weren't you? How about it, Marshal?"

Strawn's fingers convulsed on his red-stained badge. He said thickly, "All right. You got it . . . straight, Walt. Denver Red was my brother, and I—I played along. You and the kid are clear, Walt, but I hope to meet—both of you in . . ."

He said no more.

Tommy grinned sleepily at Madge, who had peeled away his shirt and was examining the bullet-hole beneath it. The kid said, "I guess maybe I'm too ornery to die."

Madge said, "You don't whistle, so your lungs are all right. Oh, Tommy, Tommy, you crazy little—"

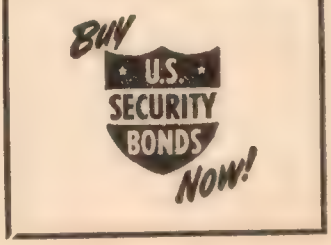
And Walt said, "You made plenty of mistakes, kid, but Soledad ain't gonna be too hard on anybody that pays for his mistakes thataway."

His voice roughened. "You'll be well soon, Tommy. By that time, Pop'll be well too, and we'll both of us team up and kick your pants."

"Meantime," said Madge, "I think I'd better give him this on account."

She kissed him enthusiastically, and the kid said, "How do you mean—I don't whistle?" and he whistled a soft, musical note.

Then he shut his eyes and went quietly to sleep again. ✠ ✠ ✠



(Continued from page 42)

His heavy feet caught in a twist of brush and Jay, coming in, hit him flush on the chin with a swing that started at his knees. Yallow went back and down. He struck on his side and rolled over onto his face. After that there was no movement of the sodden body.

For a long moment Jay stared down at him. Then he swung slowly around, came to a tree beside Ludy and hung on, gulping air.

In the sudden silence following the rush and fury of this fight Ludy unlocked his stiffened fingers from the gun and shook the sweat from his forehead. The mighty Yallow had been beaten to earth and it was past all belief. And pop had said Jay was tame! Ludy rubbed a hand on his thigh, feeling a hot and joyful pride.

Cynthia brushed past and caught Jay's battered fist in her hands. "I saw y-you go by." Her voice was unsteady. "I came as fast as I could."

Jay stared at the ground. He said heavily, "You find me brawling like any cowhand on a Saturday drunk. I've tried to be quiet and dignified like your dad—like a banker should—but I guess it's not in me. There's a wild streak, Cyn—"

"As though I didn't know!" A drop glittered beneath her lids and slid down her cheek. She had never looked like this, so soft and glowing—and proud.

And as Jay looked at her the heaviness left his body, despite the beating he had taken, and he reached for her with arms that seemed to feel a great hunger.

Ludy turned away. Girls cried at the darndest times. Here she was about to bring the greatest fighter and certainly the world's best shot into the family, and she cried!

Getting himself up on the bay he felt such pure rapture that he would certainly burst if he didn't get back and tell pop. He rode from the clearing holding with prideful care the gun of his hero. ❋ ❋ ❋

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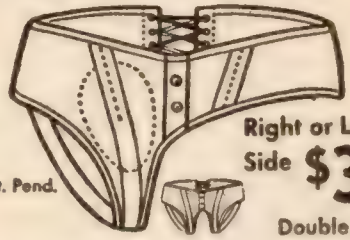

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(Continued from page 43)

get stuck. The animal would be caught there until released, or until he fell and was trampled to death.

All in all, when the railroad came along and drove the herds off the trail and into its cattle cars, it spelled the doom of that grand old creature on whose bones the cattle industry was founded.

THERE are old-timers who will tell you that the longhorn knew what he was about when he was developing those old mossy horns. They will admit that while you could easily pack all the beef he made into one of his horns and still leave room for the gravy, he was well equipped to withstand the typical Texas drought that came along every year and baked the ground so dry that the whole range was crisscrossed with cracks you could bury a horse in.

They say that ordinary cows would have fallen into these drought cracks and never been heard from again. But a longhorn, now he was a different critter. He could fall into one of those heat cracks—all but his horns. They would rest on both sides of the crack and he would hang there suspended until the Fall rains came and filled up the crack, and then he would go on about his business.

A scrub crossed by a railroad engine might have ended up a thoroughbred in the court of claims, but when the cattle car crossed the longhorn's trail, old mossyhorn ended up as a curio on some saloon wall.

All of which goes to prove the Westerner was giving only the best of advice when he yelled: "Pull in your horns!"

The best advice we can give, though is that for action-packed fiction sagas of the West, in all its color and drama, look in the pages of *Dime Western*. The next issue will be on sale September 3rd. See you then!

—*The Editor.*

RIDE THE RED DEVIL!

(Continued from page 91)

"My name is—Mac," I stated as calmly as I could speak.

"So be it, Mac. You're hired at two hundred bucks a month for as long as you want to stay." Then he added, "You can have your pay in cash—or horseflesh."

"Make it on one condition, Boss," a voice spoke up, and the man from the blacksmith shop stepped forward.

"Make it that he's got to help me some every day, for a while at least, long as I need him—and when I need him."

"Why, Joe? What could a one-handed—what could he do in a blacksmith shop?"

"I had him helpin' me out this evenin'. He's the man I want. You know I need help."

"He shore do, Boss," the cook contributed.

"—Well, okay," Jeff answered. The three of them looked at each other—the new cook, the one-legged blacksmith and the Big Boss—they understood each other, and me, I understood them.

In time, when I get this stub completely subdued, Jane-Baby, Red Hellion and me, will get us a string of colts together, and be on the road with the rodeos again. And it won't be long—say maybe a year, now. ✱ ✱ ✱

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JOHN T. LYNCH

(Continued from page 10)

Jemuel stopped for a few breaths, then continued. "Thought sure I was licked, I wasn't goin' to stop at Pest Bradson's place. It couldn't be him, I figgered. But, that dang dog—he started nosin' around in that yard of Pest's. He starts to howl and yell. All the time he is pawin' at somethin' in the ground. I gets off my horse to see what the ruckus is. When I get there, this dog has dug that there laig out of a shallow hole. Then, o' course, I knew. Makin' sure that Pest wasn't around, I got me a shovel from his shack, and started diggin' every place the dog pawed and howled. There is what I dug up—right in Pest Bradson's front yard. Hard to tell what he's got buried in the back."

Carl Luttig found his voice. In a short time the entire town knew the mystery of the missing men had been solved. A detail was appointed to take the now sniveling Pest Bradson to the jail, while a larger group went out to the shack to dig up more evidence. They found it in vast quantity. Scattered around, under the dirt floor of the shack, around the sides and in back of the place, pieces of former citizens were recovered, in varying states of decay. The coroner estimated that at least twenty men had donated parts of their lifeless selves to the gruesome collection.

A few days later, at the big oak hangin' tree, at the edge of Screechin' Hollow, Jemuel Gnaggs stood at an aloof distance and watched the folks hang Pest Bradson.

Bradson died on that June morning, of 1861, refusing to the last to give a reason why he had killed so many of his fellow townsmen. But, to Jemuel Gnaggs it was perfectly clear.

"I thought I was the world's champeen human bein' hater," Gnaggs confided to Carl Luttig, as they watched the body sway in the breeze. "But I guess I wasn't. He must've hated 'em a dang sight more'n I do."

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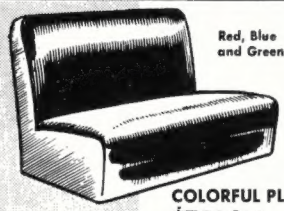

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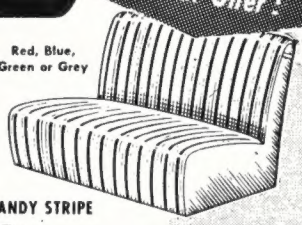

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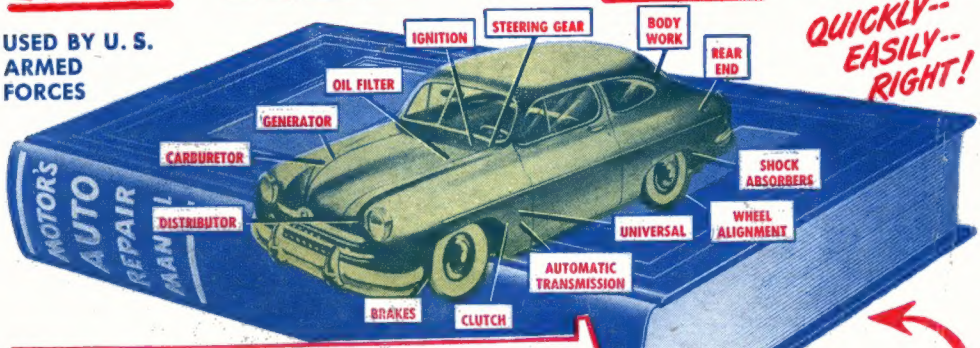

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